The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Canonizing Allen Ginsberg *by Bruce Bawer,* 1

Einstein's long march to Brooklyn *by Samuel Lipman,* 15

Dufy among the pattern painters *by Jed Perl,* 25

A catalogue raisonné for Arthur Dove *by Hilton Kramer,* 34

New poems *by Donald Justice & James Aitchison,* 41

Letter from Salzburg: The new Berio-Calvino opera *by Dana Mack,* 47; **Theater:** Stalemate in Cambridge *by Mimi Kramer,* 52; **Dance:** An American "Giselle" *by Eva Resnikova,* 62; **Art:** The small-scale paintings of Cavallino *by Creighton Gilbert,* 66; The Borofsky spectacle *by Eric Gibson,* 70 **Books:** *Susan Cheever* Home before dark *reviewed by Roger Kimball,* 73; *J. B. Priestley* English journey & *Beryl Bainbridge* English journey: or the road to Milton Keynes *reviewed by Herb Greer,* 78; *James R. Mellow* Invented lives: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald *reviewed by Sonya Rudikoff,* 83; **Notebook:** A crow for the Queen *by Robert Richman,* 90

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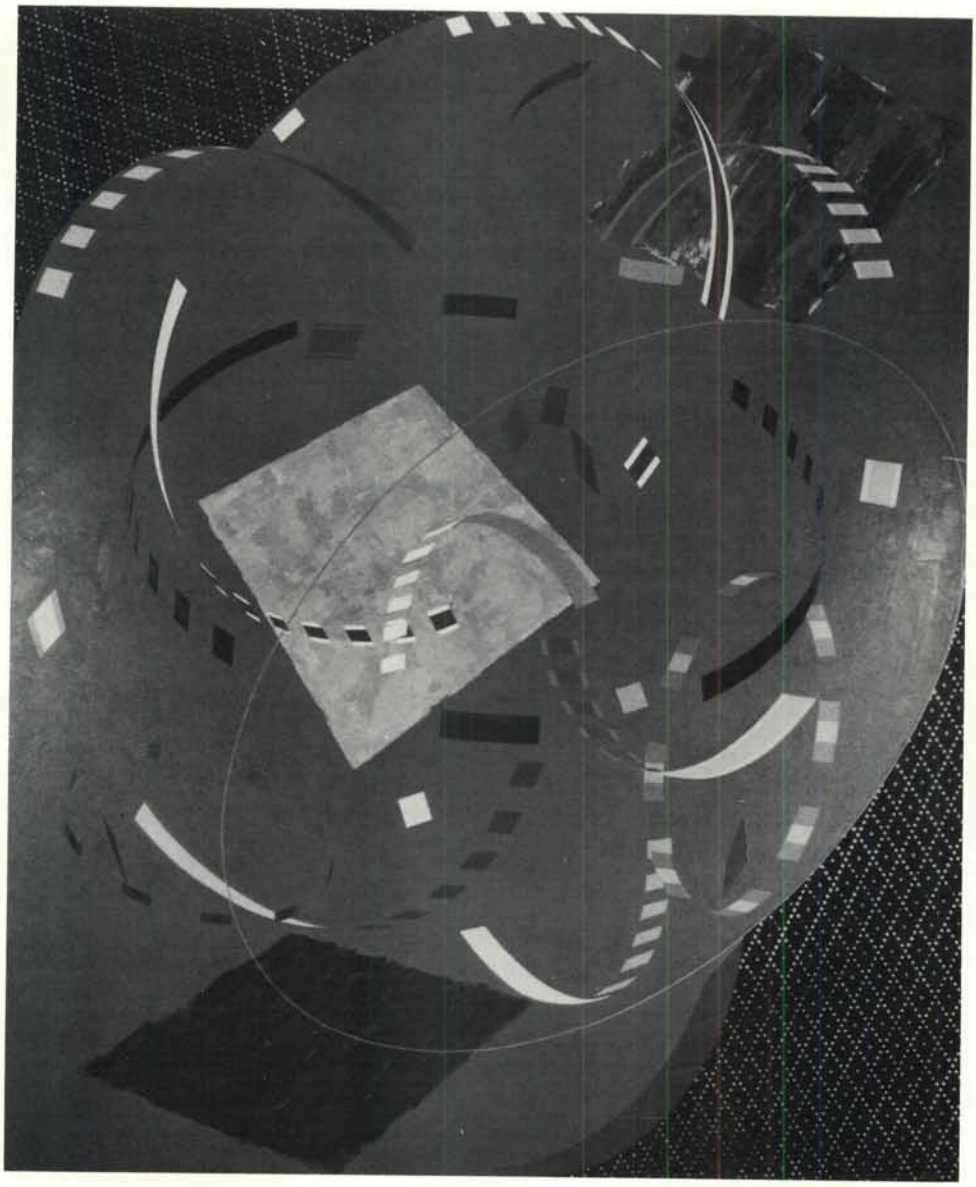

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The phenomenon of Allen Ginsberg

by Bruce Bawer

I'm so lucky to be nutty.
—Allen Ginsberg, "Bop Lyrics" (1949)

The very first poem in Allen Ginsberg's *Collected Poems 1947-1980*[1] seems, in a way, to prophesy Ginsberg's entire career. It is titled "In Society," and it dates from 1947, when the poet was twenty-one years old. The poem records a dream: Ginsberg is at a high-society cocktail party, is more or less ignored, and is told by a woman, "I don't like you." He screams at her:

> . . . "What!"
> in outrage. "Why you shit-faced fool!"
> This got everybody's attention.
> "Why you narcissistic bitch! How
> can you decide when you don't even
> know me," I continued in a violent
> and messianic voice, inspired at last,
> dominating the whole room.

Could Ginsberg have known, at that tender age, that he would spend much of his adult life dominating rooms in this manic, "messianic" manner—indeed, that his attention-getting tactics at poetry readings, political conventions, sit-ins, be-ins, protest marches, and Yippie Life Festivals would be a crucial catalyst in his rise to fame? Even Richard Howard, who in his no-nonsense survey of contemporary American poetry, *Alone with America,* begins forty of forty-one essays with a businesslike disquisition upon the poetic career at hand ("In 1960, Howard Moss selected an appropriate showing of poems from his first three volumes . . ."), makes an exception in the case of Allen Ginsberg. The long opening paragraph of Howard's essay on Ginsberg is devoted not to *explication de texte* but to an anecdote. The gist of it is that once, at a poetry conference attended by Howard, an elderly poet just back from Nigeria was "extol[ling] the rare privilege of moving among a race of women proudly nude," whereupon the bard of the Beat Generation rose from his seat, "stepped up onto the dais and without a word, without a smile, without a single deprecating gesture, Allen Ginsberg took off all his clothes."

You could fill a book with Ginsberg anecdotes of this sort. (The stories about him removing his clothing at one public gathering or another would by themselves make up a long chapter.) What is remarkable is not that Ginsberg has advertised himself with such arrogance and audacity, but that it has worked like a charm; thanks to such shameless scene-stealing antics, he has attained a measure of fame that he could never have secured by his poetry alone. He is, unarguably, the only poet in America who is not just a member of the august American Academy of Arts and Letters but a bona fide celebrity, the sort who appears on network

1 *Collected Poems 1947-1980,* by Allen Ginsberg; Harper & Row, 837 pages, $27.50.

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talk shows. He is idolized by English professors as well as rock stars, and associates comfortably with both groups. He is truly famous.

The *Collected Poems 1947-1980* is the ultimate testimony to this fame. Two inches thick, clad in a bright, firetruck-red wrapper, this imposing tome, like its author, stands out big and brash among its fellows, demanding to be recognized. Its message could not be more obvious: that this poet, whose verse has heretofore been packed into numerous shoddy little small-press volumes, henceforth belongs to the ages. What's more, the *Collected Poems* is only the first step in what amounts to the mainstream press's canonization of Allen Ginsberg. In the words of the publicity flyer accompanying the review copy, Harper & Row will, in the fullness of time, "make available [Ginsberg's] journals, letters, literary essays, and lectures on American literature, as well as a new collection of poems scheduled to coincide with his sixtieth birthday in 1986." What poet, living or dead, has been treated so reverently by Publishers' Row? There can be no denying it hereafter: Allen Ginsberg, who rose to renown as the outspoken enemy of the Establishment, and the most prominent feature of whose poetry has always been its hostility to the order of things in the United States of America, is now the Republic's premier Establishment poet.

Ginsberg's parents, at least, would have been happy. And if there is anything in America that Allen Ginsberg has not rebelled against in his three decades as the amazingly tireless (and drearily tiresome) Poet of Protest, it is his parents. Ginsberg's father, Louis, was a poet—a premodernist rhymester, to be sure, but a poet; his mother, Naomi, was a Communist agitator whose paranoid psychosis (as any reader of "Kaddish" knows) eventually necessitated her commitment to a mental institution. Poetry, paranoia, protest: this was the mixed legacy of Ginsberg's parents, and it is a legacy to which Ginsberg—who has dedicated his *Collected Poems* to their memory—has been eternally and entirely faithful. When, at age sixteen, he left their Paterson, New Jersey, home to attend Columbia University, Ginsberg took up studies in literature, his father's field; and, just as loyally, he rejected the opportunity that Columbia offered to breathe sane air for the first time in his life. Rather—in a clear attempt to cultivate a Naomi Ginsberg-like rebelliousness—Ginsberg took up with the Beats.

Or, more precisely, the as-yet-unknown Beats-to-be. At first, in addition to Ginsberg, there were three of them: Jack Kerouac (a middle-class boy who lived with his mother in Ozone Park, Queens), William Burroughs (an heir to the gigantic corporation of the same name), and Lucien Carr (a slim, handsome student at Columbia). Though they looked harmless enough, Kerouac, Burroughs, and Carr had the same problem Ginsberg did: they craved chaos. They looked down upon the society in which they lived, for no other reason than that, like any other nonanarchic society, it had laws, a government, a way of life; they considered the classical, intellectually oriented education offered at Columbia to be pointless and stifling; and they romanticized poverty, criminality, and rootlessness in a way that only naïve, sheltered young men could do. They felt themselves to be geniuses—literary geniuses, to be precise—and disdained the "well-made" piece of writing as much as they did the well-ordered mind. Truly great minds, they insisted, were not sane and stable and logical, and did not express themselves in lucid, beautifully balanced sentences; instead, such minds soared above the surface of the earth, touched the stars, whirled and shook and spun erratically in the upper air. The great, in short, were always a little mad. Thus it was with genuine pride that the Beats asserted—at first to one another, and then, later, to an increasingly attentive world—their own madness.

The Beats have been spoken of as populist writers, as celebrators of the democratic spirit. But the truth is that they were confirmed elitists. Their collective self-image was nothing short of messianic; in their

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judgment, they were, by virtue of their self-proclaimed mental instability, incomparably superior to the civilization into which they had been born, to the professors who had been designated to instruct them, to the great authors that everybody read. The appeal of this anti-logic to the young Ginsberg, in particular, is obvious: what could bring more comfort to a sensitive young man who loved his mother than the idea that her mental illness, far from being a family tragedy, was, on the contrary, something to be proud of? It was this anti-logic, at any rate, that persuaded Ginsberg, when he was not yet twenty years old, to reject Lionel Trilling and the other too-sane "squares" of the Columbia English department as being utterly incapable of giving him a real education, and to allow the loosely bound Burroughs (who was twelve years older than he was) and the wacky Kerouac (four years his senior) to be his literary mentors. The Beats used the same anti-logic to determine which outsiders would be allowed to join their fraternity. Thus Herbert Huncke, a psychopathic burglar and drug addict who was known to New York police as "the Creep" (and whom Ginsberg once described as "the only sophisticated man in New York"), was heartily welcomed into the fold. (Huncke would make an enduring, if unwitting, contribution to American literature: he introduced his cronies to the word "beat," meaning worn-out, jaded; it was Kerouac who, in a deliberate echo of Gertrude Stein's "lost generation" remark, borrowed Huncke's word and coined the appelation "the Beat Generation.") And Neal Cassady, a dashing railway brakeman from Denver who arrived on the scene in 1946, was such an excellent specimen of the obsessive-compulsive type that the Beats not only let him into their charmed circle but, endlessly fascinated by his hyperkinetic hedonism, made a literary hero out of him. Kerouac would immortalize him as Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* (1956) and other novels, and Ginsberg (who fell in love with Cassady) would write numerous poems about him over the ensuing decades, one of the first being "Dakar Doldrums" (1947). The initial stanza of this poem not only demonstrates the intensity of Ginsberg's unrequited passion (Cassady had thrown him over for a woman, and a despondent Ginsberg had signed onto a freighter bound for Senegal) but provides a good illustration of his extremely imitative, pseudo-Elizabethan early style (the first of many extremely imitative Ginsberg styles):

> Most dear, and dearest at this moment most,
> Since this my love for thee is thus more free
> Than that I cherished more dear and lost;
> Most near, now nearest where I fly from thee:
> Thy love most consummated is in absence,
> Half for the trust I have for thee in mind,
> Half for the pleasures of thee in remembrance—
> Thou art most full and fair of all thy kind.

Amid all the *non compos mentis* carryings-on, then, there *was* some writing going on among the Beats. But, all in all, the history of Ginsberg's first years with his subterranean compeers bears less resemblance to a literary chronicle than it does to a textbook of case histories in schizophrenia. Two incidents stand out. The first, which took place in 1944, was the murder by Lucien Carr of a young man named David Kammerer, who, according to Carr, had made a pass at him. Since the crime was therefore an "honor slaying," Carr was let off with a relatively brief term in an Elmira, New York, reformatory. His fellow Beats, for their part, appear to have gotten a Norman Mailerish thrill out of the affair; the murder, one gathers from the many narratives that have touched on the crime, confirmed their image of themselves as a dangerous band of underground rebels. Then, in 1948 (the year he was finally graduated from Columbia), Ginsberg had his first brush with fame. He was implicated in one of Huncke's burglaries, got his picture on the cover of the *Daily News* as a result, and was sent to the Columbia Psychiatric Institute instead of prison. There he met and befriended Carl Solomon, a well-read maniac who (one gets the impression) made the Beats look like the Sitwells; upon release from the Institute,

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Solomon immediately assumed the role of the group's so-called "lunatic saint." (He would also, in time, become the raving mad junkie-protagonist of Ginsberg's most famous poem, "Howl.") Solomon was, in the words of Beat historian John Tytell, something of a Platonic ideal of "the artist as outrage"—and therefore, obviously, a model of sorts for the outrageous public persona that Ginsberg was eventually to assume.[2]

Besides being the year that Ginsberg joined Carr in the pantheon of hipster hoods, 1948 was also the year of two supposedly epiphanic events in the life of the aspiring poet. The first involved William Blake. One day, Ginsberg was alone in his apartment, having just read "Ah! Sun-Flower" (a poem in *Songs of Experience*), when suddenly he heard a voice—that of Blake himself, he figured—reading the verses aloud. Over the next few weeks, the voice returned and read other Blake poems to him. The Ginsberg groupies have made much of this incident; Paul Portugés devotes a whole book *(The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg)* to an interpretation of Ginsberg's entire corpus in light of it, insisting that the auditory hallucination "revolutionized [Ginsberg's] ideas about poetry, his concept of self, and his perception of the quotidian world." Ginsberg himself (as quoted in Jane Kramer's book *Allen Ginsberg in America*) puts it this way:

> The thing I felt was that there was this big god over all, who was completely aware and completely conscious of everything, and at the same time completely the same as everybody, and that the whole purpose of being born was to wake up to Him . . . . I felt everything vibrating in one harmony—all past efforts and desires, all present realizations . . . . And I felt that even *my* previous ponderings had been harmoniously flower-petaled toward this final understanding of what it was all about and that all my poetic musings about supreme reality were prophetic, really, and just the sweet, well-intentioned strivings of a poor mind to reach what was already there.[3]

What it comes down to is that this "visitation" (which occurred, by the way, after Ginsberg had been smoking marijuana and inhaling Benzedrine regularly for several years) gave Ginsberg an abrupt push in the direction of the cosmic. It made him more of a transcendental poet than he had been before—the sort of poet, that is, who does not think of a poem as an object, a "made thing," but rather as the effusion of a poetic self that sees all, knows all, encompasses all. This was, then, the beginning of the end of whatever interest the twenty-two-year-old Ginsberg might have had in developing his poetic technique.

The second epiphanic event of 1948 was somewhat more down-to-earth. Ginsberg went to hear his fellow Patersonian, William Carlos Williams, read at the Museum of Modern Art, and when the older poet recited his poem "The Clouds," which at its end trails off in mid-sentence, the device struck Ginsberg with the force of a revelation: you could write the way you talk! Up to this point he had been, in his own words, "hung up on cats like Wyatt, Surrey, and Donne," and had churned out reams of pseudo-Elizabethan poems (and would continue to do so for a couple more years, finally abandoning the iamb—for a while, anyway—after "Ode: My Twenty-Fourth Year" in 1950-1951). Now, hung up on a cat named Williams, he began dividing entries from his prose journals into lines and calling them poems:

> I walked into the cocktail party
> room and found three or four queers
> talking together in queertalk.
> I tried to be friendly but heard

2 Tytell's book is *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (McGraw-Hill, 1976).

3 *Allen Ginsberg in America*, by Jane Kramer (Random House, 1969), pages 72-73. Jane Kramer, a *New Yorker* writer, plays Boswell to Ginsberg's Johnson, reverently recording every "yeah," "like," "wow," and "om" that the poet uttered over a period of several months in 1967.

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myself talking to one in hiptalk.
"I'm glad to see you," he said, and
looked away. "Hmn," I mused. The room
was small and had a double-decker
bed in it, and cooking apparatus:
icebox, cabinet, toasters, stove;
the hosts seemed to live with room
enough only for cooking and sleeping.

Now, *that* was the way to write a poem—no muss, no fuss! Williams, whom Ginsberg soon came to know quite well (and whom he would refer to in later years as his "guru"), was flattered by these imitative (if utterly unimaginative) verses and provided an introduction for the book in which Ginsberg planned to publish them.

That book, however—*Empty Mirror* was its title—would not find a publisher till 1961; so Williams obligingly contributed a second introduction to what became Ginsberg's debut volume, *Howl & Other Poems* (1956). Between the writing of *Empty Mirror* and of *Howl,* though, Williams's influence waned. There were (aside from the obvious incompatibility of Williams's "no-ideas-but-in-things" approach and Ginsberg's Blake-born neo-Platonism) several reasons for this decline in influence. One of them was Kerouac's new "theory" of spontaneous writing, to which Ginsberg subscribed enthusiastically upon its introduction in 1951. The idea, as set forth in Kerouac's essay "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (and applied in the fast-as-lightning composition of *On the Road*), was that, when one is writing, the first words to enter one's head are always the best ones for the purpose; revision is a deceitful process because it involves *thinking,* that dreaded enemy of honest feeling and consequently of true art. "First thought, best thought": it was a ridiculous concept, but one perfectly suited to the Beats, who were impatient, impulsive, and incomparably conceited, who hated order, and who didn't really want to spend all that much time writing anyway. (If they did, there wouldn't be any time left to be "hip.") Ginsberg, for one, would never be the same after "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose"; Kerouac, he was later to say (in one of the most dubious compliments in the history of American literature), "taught me everything I knew about writing."

But Kerouac was not the only member of the Beat Generation who was making discoveries. Sometime between the writing of *Empty Mirror* and of *Howl* Ginsberg made a big one: Walt Whitman. Here, he realized, was the perfect model for the spontaneous, transcendental poet he wanted to be. Ginsberg's Open Road was to be different from Whitman's, though; his journey down the "long brown path" of Whitmanian fame was not to be a lyrical, lighthearted hike but a bumpy, buffoonish protest march. "Paterson" (1949), his first poem in imitation of the Bard of Paumanok, not only made it clear that he had shamelessly appropriated the entire arsenal of Whitmanian devices—the vatic tone, the long lines, the comprehensive lists, the names of American places, the programmatic egocentrism, the rampant sensuality, the practice of beginning a series of lines with the same words or phrases, and the obsession with the past, present, and future of America—but established the distinctly un-Whitmanian uses to which he would put them. At the beginning of "Paterson," Ginsberg bluntly declares his hostility toward the American way of life: "What do I want in these rooms papered with visions of money?" He despises the idea of participating in an economic system governed by "the slobs and dumbbells of the ego with money and power/to hire and fire and make and break and fart and justify their reality of wrath/and rumor of wrath to wrath-weary man." What sort of life would Ginsberg prefer? A demented, disordered one, of course:

I would rather go mad, gone down the dark
road to Mexico, heroine dripping in my veins,
eyes and ears full of marijuana,
eating the god Peyote on the floor of a mudhut
on the border
or laying in a hotel room over the body of
some suffering man or woman;
rather jar my body down the road, crying by

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a diner in the Western sun;
rather crawl on my naked belly over the tincans
of Cincinnati;
rather drag a rotten railroad tie to a Golgotha
in the Rockies;
rather, crowned with thorns in Galveston,
nailed hand and foot in Los Angeles, raised
up to die in Denver,
pierced in the side in Chicago, perished and
tombed in New Orleans and resurrected in
1958 somewhere on Garrett Mountain,
come down roaring in a blaze of hot cars and
garbage,
streetcorner Evangel in front of City Hall,
surrounded by statues of agonized lions,
with a mouthful of shit, and the hair rising on
my scalp,
screaming and dancing in praise of Eternity
annihilating the sidewalk, annihilating reality,
screaming and dancing against the orchestra
in the destructible ballroom of the world,
blood streaming from my belly and shoulders
flooding the city with its hideous ecstasy,
rolling over the pavements and highways
by the bayoux and forests and derricks leaving
my flesh and my bones hanging on the trees.

With "Paterson," then, Ginsberg set the course he would follow for the rest of his life: that of the self-proclaimed martyr and madman, the Hyde to Whitman's Jekyll, the prophet-poet turned enemy of the system.

Ginsberg made other significant "discoveries" besides Whitman, of course. From around 1952, the poet, in his own words, "experimented with poetic effect of psychedelic drugs." What this means is that he wrote "Howl" on peyote, "Wales Visitation" on LSD, "I Hate America" on heroin, "On Neal's Ashes" on morphine or marijuana, "Denver Doldrums" on Benzedrine, "Kaddish" on methadrine, "A Ghost May Come" on marijuana, "Death to Van Gogh's Ear!" on codeine. He composed a series of poems that take their titles from the name of the drug on which they were written: "Mescaline," "Laughing Gas," "Lysergic Acid." He went all the way to Peru just to bring back a hallucinogenic vine called *ayahuasca*. Portugés's book contains an interview in which Ginsberg discusses in depth the various effects of these substances on his work. "All mellow poems seem to emerge out of heroin. Endless metaphysical-political ravings in my journal and other stuff you've seen were written on morphine and heroin." He speaks of poems like "Marijuana Notation" and "Psalm I" as having a "grass-like clarity." He says of laughing gas: "It gives the appearance of enlarging perception to a point where the totality of the universe invades the individual entity and dissolves the individual entity into the blackness of space." These were not, of course, private "experiments"; Ginsberg, like his friend and fellow chemist Timothy Leary, proselytized long and hard for the use of psychedelic drugs, travelling from campus to campus reciting poems like "Aether," in which he asserts that "you can see/God by sniffing the/gas in a cotton . . . ."

Ginsberg also discovered Eastern religion. His full-dress involvement with it dates back to the early Sixties, when he went to Asia and found himself intrigued by Hinduism and Buddhism. What appealed to him most about these religions was their emphasis on the self-determination of the individual and their understanding of morality as a subjective consideration. Life was not a matter of objective right and wrong, it was a matter of being true to one's own karmic sense of things. No philosophy of life could have pleased Ginsberg more. His exploration of Eastern religions has continued ever since; in the autobiographical notes to his *Poems All Over the Place, Mostly Seventies* (1978), Ginsberg indicated that he was spending a good deal of his time practicing both "mantra-heart meditation" (with one Swami Muktananda) and Tibetan Buddhist meditation. The influence of Hinduism, Hare Krishna, and the various species of Buddhism on his work has been largely semantic; in his poems and journals, for instance, he habitually (and gratuitously) describes relationships in terms of karmas and yogas. This is not to suggest, of course, that the babas, swamis, gurus, and lamas have not had a substantial impact upon the way Gins-

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berg lives and writes; like his psychedelic drugs, they have helped him fight off the desire for intellectual order that exists in some corner of every conscious mind and to give even freer rein to his id. Ginsberg, in typical fashion, prefers to describe this process as the "holy divine yoga of losing ego."

Ginsberg's id, of course, was unusually healthy even without the help of the gods of the East. It was, in fact, years before he signed his soul over to them that Ginsberg and his id became famous. The setting for this historic occasion was a place called the Six Gallery in San Francisco; the poem—in which Ginsberg brought the mad-anarchist persona of "Paterson" into full bloom—was, needless to say, "Howl." Ginsberg had moved to the Bay City two years earlier, establishing connections with such local poets as Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Kenneth Rexroth, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and finding himself a twenty-year-old lover named Peter Orlovsky, who was (in Orlovsky's own words) "crazy as a wildflower" and who has lived with Ginsberg, on and off, ever since. (Like Ginsberg, Orlovsky had had a visionary epiphany: he had been walking down the street one day and the trees had bowed down to him.)

That evening in the Six Gallery all of the above were present—as were Kerouac and Cassady—as Ginsberg introduced "Howl" to the world in his best artist-as-outrage manner. The poem created a sensation, one that a brave reader (aware, perhaps, that Ginsberg had earned a living for a time as a "marketing research consultant") might ascribe not so much to its literary merits as to Ginsberg's truly impressive job of packaging—to his projection, both in print and in person, of a sharply defined, attention-getting persona. "Howl"—which, as Norman Podhoretz was to write soon afterward, "got the San Francisco renaissance off to a screaming start"—succeeded even better than "Paterson" in conveying the Beat movement's hatred of bourgeois life, its rejection of every known type of order (whether psychological, social, or aesthetic), and its conviction that America's best and brightest were to be found wherever the disturbed and the delinquent congregated. The extremity of the poem's point of view, the singular way in which Ginsberg delivered it, and the obscenity trial that followed its publication by City Lights Books fixed Ginsberg in the literary firmament in a way that a less outrageous piece of writing (however magnificent it might be) could never have done.

Ginsberg learned his lesson. Since "Howl," he has published (and read from a thousand platforms) over a dozen books of poetry, and the recipe has remained pretty much the same throughout: take one part anti-Establishment rhetoric, one part sexual indelicacy, one part scatology and general grubbiness, and mix rather sloppily. *Voilà*—a book of poetry. And a Guggenheim, a National Book Award, a membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a *Collected Poems* issued by Harper & Row. Ginsberg is thought of as a radical poet, but in a sense he is anything but; like the most uncreative contributor to *Reader's Digest* or *Time* (the two magazines he most frequently maligns in his verse), he has always known his audience and has always given it exactly what it wanted. The one thing that can never be found in his poetry is the unexpected. He has, for instance, been carrying on about Americans and their money for decades, and the subtlety of his observations and the eloquence of his expression have failed to develop beyond the monotonous Moloch-chant of "Howl" ("Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!", etc.) or the sloppy superficiality of his 1957 poem, "Death to Van Gogh's Ear!":

> Money! Money! Money! shrieking mad celestial money of illusion! Money made of nothing, starvation, suicide! Money of failure! Money of death!
> Money against Eternity! and eternity's strong mills grind out vast paper of Illusion!

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Money, he howls, "has reckoned the soul of America." Money has put

> millions of agitated fanatics in the bughouse
> for the sake of the screaming soprano
> of industry
> Money-chant of soapers—toothpaste apes in
> television sets—deodorizers on hypnotic
> chairs—
> petroleum mongers in Texas—jet plane
> streaks among the clouds—
> sky writers liars in the face of Divinity—
> fanged butchers of hats and shoes, all
> Owners! Owners! Owners! with obsession
> on property and vanishing Selfhood!

For awkwardness and lack of originality, the poem is hard to beat; but Ginsberg has valiantly spent the rest of his career trying. In a 1970 poem called "Friday the Thirteenth," he is still singing the same unmelodic, rhythmically ragged tune:

> Slaves of Plastic! Leather-shoe chino-pants
> prisoners! Haircut junkies! Dacron-sniffers!
> Striped tie addicts! short hair monkeys on
> their backs! Whiskey freaks bombed out on
> 530 billion cigarettes a year—
> twenty Billion dollar advertising Dealers!
> lipstick skin-poppers & syndicate Garbage
> telex-Heads!
> Star-striped scoundrelesque flag-dopers!
> Car-smog hookers Fiendish on
> superhighways!
> Growth rate trippers hallucinating Everglade
> real estate! Steak swallowers zonked on
> Television!
> Old ladies on Stockmarket habits—old Wall
> Street paper Money-pushers!

Yes, it certainly does sound like the literary equivalent of a *Pravda* cartoon, but for the past few decades there has been a substantial segment of the American literary public eager to applaud such brassy banalities. This is not to suggest that Wall Street and Madison Avenue are not excellent targets for satire. They are. But these collocations of anti-capitalist clichés are not satire. Satire requires wit, and these witless lines attest only to the extremity of Ginsberg's attitude toward America. Ginsberg simply cannot stand the fact that Americans purchase homes, buy clothing, eat well and regularly, use cars to get places. The orderliness of it all enrages him. That Americans do other things in the course of a day besides buy stock, wear synthetics, and watch television does not seem to occur to him; the only emotional depth or sensitivity of which he appears to be aware is his own and that of his cronies. These poems attack the supposed monomaniacal consumerism of the typical American, but it is Ginsberg who is the monomaniac: he cannot look at middle-class America without seeing a race of faceless, heartless, mass-consuming, polluting, war-mongering, credit-card-using, *Reader's Digest*-reading robots. That he himself watches television, buys property (a good deal of it, too), and eats well does not deter him in the least from waxing hysterical about the fact that others do. He knows *he's* okay—he sweats, drools, performs all the other bodily functions, and describes it all in graphic detail every chance he gets. And he knows his friends and lovers are okay, too. It's the rest of the country in whose loving, feeling, laughing, crying, thinking, breathing reality he is incapable of believing. It's as if you have to drag yourself through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, bite detectives in the neck and shriek with delight in police cars, and howl on your knees in the subway in order to be recognized by Ginsberg as having feelings.

One of Ginsberg's favorite themes is the FBI-CIA-Mafia-Pentagon-White House-Chase Manhattan-Standard Oil-ITT-NBC-ABC-CBS-*New York Times*-Reader's Digest cabal. In "Television Was a Baby Crawling Toward That Deathchamber" (1961), Ginsberg describes "the Presidential mike & all its starry bunting" as a "front for some mad BILLIONAIRES/who own United Fruits & Standard Oil and Hearst The Press and Texas NBC and someone owns the Radios owns vast Spheres of Air . . . ." He suggests secret and sinister connections among a

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multitude of American corporations, the Mutual Network and the *Reader's Digest,* and maintains that

> Six billionaires that control America are playing Scrabble with antique Tarot—they've just unearthed another Pyramid—in the bombproof Cellar at Fort Knox
> Not even the FBI knows who—They give orders to J. E. Hoover thru the metal phonegirl at the Robot Transmitter on top of RCA . . . .

And on and on it goes, in "'Have You Seen This Movie?'" (1970):

> . . . What Mafia runs N.J.? What Mafia knew J. Edgar FBI?
> What's Schenley's Whiskey trader Fleishmann's Hoover Institute?
> What opium's passed thru CIA Agents' airplane's luggage in Saigon, Bangkok, Athens, Washington?
> What narcotic agent's not dependent on Shit for a living?
> What Bank's money created ex nihil serves orphan, widow, monk, philosopher?
> or what Bank's money serves real Estate Asphalt over widow's garden? Serves old Nick in the Pentagon?

—and in "Anti-Vietnam War Peace Mobilization" (1970), wherein Ginsberg describes the White House as

> . . . filled with mustached Germans
> & police buttons, army telephones, CIA Buzzers, FBI bugs
> Secret Service walkie-talkies, Intercom squawkers to Narco
> Fuzz & Florida Mafia Real Estate Speculators.

—and in "Thoughts on a Breath" (1974), a meditation upon

> Police state, Students, Poetry open tongue, anger and fear of Cops,
> Oil Cops, Rockefeller Cops, Oswald Cops, Johnson Cops Nixon Cops president Cops
> SMU Cops Trustee Cops CIA Cops FBI Cops Goon Squads of Dope

—and in "Hadda Be Playing on the Jukebox (1975):

> Hadda be Central Intelligence The Family "Our Thing" the Agency Mafia Organized Crime FBI Dope Cops & Multinational Corporations
> one big set of Criminal gangs working together in Cahoots
> . . .
> Secret Police embraced for decades, NKVD & CIA keep eachother's secrets, OGPU & DIA never hit their own, KGB & FBI one mind—brute force

—and in "Birdbrain!" (1980):

> Birdbrain runs the World!
> Birdbrain is the ultimate product of Capitalism
> Birdbrain chief bureaucrat of Russia, yawning
> Birdbrain ran FBI 30 years appointed by F. D. Roosevelt and never chased Cosa Nostra!
> . . .
> Birdbrain runs the Pentagon his brother runs the CIA, Fatass Bucks!
> Birdbrain writes and edits *Time Newsweek Wall Street Journal Pravda Izvestia* . . . .

Does Ginsberg believe in the literal truth of all these accusations of conspiracy? Certainly not. He is showing us what runaway paranoia looks like. But to what purpose? Apparently, this is not meant to discredit *him,* to make him look ridiculous, but is intended rather as an eloquent condemnation of the American economic and political system. And critics and readers buy it in droves. It is as if Ginsberg's absurd, anarchistic paranoia is itself, to some people's way of thinking, evidence against "The System." Nor do Ginsberg's fans seem to be disturbed by the indiscriminateness of his put-downs. "In America it's Attica in Russia it's Lubianka Wall," he writes in "Capitol Air" (1980). Television and Nazi gas cham-

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bers, the mass media and Stalin's gulags: to Ginsberg, as far as one can tell, they are all equally horrible. He makes no distinctions at all—he is just *against, against, against*—and this is a significant failing, for perceptive, sensitive distinctions are the basis of all intelligent discourse and all worthwhile art. Such catalogue poems as "Capitol Air" and "Yes and It's Hopeless" and "Birdbrain!" lump the unpleasant in with the evil, link various phenomena of American popular culture with some of the more hateful manifestations of Soviet totalitarianism. Ginsberg's point is identical throughout: "The System the System in Russia & China the same." What he hates, patently, is the very idea of a *system*; and he sees absolutely no difference between a system that is essentially democratic and one that is out-and-out totalitarian.

To read such poems as these back-to-back in the *Collected Poems* is to be stunned by the oversimplification, the repetition, the self-indulgence, the egocentrism, the utter inability to develop a theme. Doesn't he ever, one wonders, get sick of reiterating these banalities? Doesn't he ever yearn to get beyond the surface cliché, to develop a more sophisticated view of the world, and to express it in more memorable and meticulously chosen words? How can he stand to keep drawing the same distorted picture of a psychedelic universe in which everyone conspires against Allen Ginsberg, rather than exploring and attempting to understand the complexities that make the actual world interesting and frustrating and *real*? Reading these poetically and intellectually vapid verses one after the other, one is constantly reminded that they were written not to be read in privacy but to be declaimed to an audience—an audience that is supposed to cheer, not think; to applaud opinions it already shares with Ginsberg, not to mull over unfamiliar ideas or admire a finely turned phrase.

Ginsberg's most famous subject, of course, is the Vietnam War. Now that his anti-war poems have been published in chronological sequence with the rest of his poetry in the *Collected Poems,* it is more obvious than ever that, to a substantial degree, the war was less a cause for Ginsberg than an opportunity. The peace movement provided him with an occasion, a focus, and a wider audience than ever for the anti-American anarchism that he had been peddling for a decade. Ginsberg's attitude toward Vietnam, as expressed in his poetry, was never that American military involvement in that part of the world was a bad idea, and that it would be in the best interests of the United States and of the ultimate cause of democracy to withdraw. No; to Ginsberg, the war was just another miserable manifestation—like television and *Time* magazine—of a system he despised. In "Returning North of Vortex" (1967), Ginsberg makes his position clear. "I hope we lose this war," he writes. "Let the Viet Cong win over the American Army!" Perhaps the most revealing lines are the following: "And if it were my wish, we'd lose & our will/be broken/& our armies scattered as we've scattered the airy guerrillas of our own yellow imagination." Scattered armies, broken wills: is this the dream of a man who wants genuine peace—that is, order, stability, tranquility—or of a connoisseur of chaos?

The answer seems obvious. And yet the literary critics of this country, in their infinite wisdom, have elevated Ginsberg to an unequaled stature among his poetry-writing contemporaries. What makes this situation all the more paradoxical is that surprisingly few of the critics who have celebrated Ginsberg in print seem honestly convinced that his poetry has any literary value at all. One critic after another, in fact, has gone out of his way to avoid remarking at any length upon the manifest mediocrity of most of Ginsberg's verse; repeatedly, one finds Ginsberg's partisans walking rhetorical tightropes, praising the poet while managing to avoid judging the poetry (or, at the very most, acknowledging its inadequacy as literature, but ingeniously discovering some nonliterary reason for admiring it). Oddest of all, many of the critics are in the habit of

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suggesting that it is just plain *wrong* to judge Ginsberg's poetry *qua* poetry. Richard Howard, for instance, writes in a recent issue of the *Boston Review* that the *Collected Poems* "may not be poetry at all, [but] it is always testimony, a kind of processional martyrology—in that martyrs are witnesses to the truth." John Malcolm Brinnin said much the same thing a decade ago in reviewing a book of Ginsberg's lectures and talks called *Allen Verbatim*: "As John Middleton Murry said of D. H. Lawrence, 'To charge him with a lack of form . . . is to be guilty of irrelevance. Art was not his aim.'" Gerrit Henry, writing in *Poetry* in 1974, observes admiringly that "the poems in *The Fall of America* aren't much as poems, but there's one whale of a *mensch* behind them." Is there any other American poet who gets reviews like this?

Not only does Ginsberg win Brownie points from his critics for being a *mensch* and a "martyr" (a martyr to what? fame? wealth? honors?); he actually gets credit for his courage. What courage? Why, the courage—believe it or not—to print such rubbish and call it poetry. Indeed, as Gerrit Henry sees it, Ginsberg's gutsiness on this account makes him nothing less than a "culture hero." "There's no doubt," Henry writes, "that Ginsberg takes an enormous risk in gathering the effect of that slapdash, patchwork sort of journalism-of-the-soul that he goes in for and calling it poetry, laying himself bare to all sorts of criticism and, indeed, mockery . . . ." Ginsberg, says Henry (in a repudiation of critical responsibility that is surprisingly common among Ginsberg's apologists), acts on a "messianic" impulse "which no critic of poetry is really empowered to judge." So there.

One of the more celebrated writers who prefer to discuss Ginsberg as messiah, rather than as poet, is Saul Bellow. In his recent story "Him with His Foot in His Mouth,"[4] Bellow, speaking through his protagonist, delivers a tribute to Ginsberg which is based entirely upon the image the poet has cultivated of himself as the twentieth century's answer to Whitman. America needs a transcendental poet, Bellow's speaker insists, and "the only authentic living representative of American Transcendentalism is that fat-breasted, bald, bearded homosexual in smeared goggles, innocent in his uncleanness." Ginsberg, the speaker suggests, "takes a stand for true tenderness and full candor. Real candor means excremental and genital literalness." (Does this mean that Euripides, Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe did not write with "real candor"? Conversely, is "excremental and genital literalness" all that "real candor" requires?) Bellow's speaker goes on:

> What Ginsberg opts for is the warmth of a freely copulating, manly, womanly, comradely, "open road" humanity which doesn't neglect to pray and to meditate. He speaks with horror of our "plastic culture," which he connects somewhat [!] obsessively with the CIA . . . . This psychopathic vision, so touching because there is, realistically, so much to be afraid of, and also because of the hunger for goodness reflected in it, a screwball defense of beauty, I value [highly] . . . . He is a faithful faggot Buddhist in America, the land of his birth. The petrochemical capitalist enemy (an enemy that needs sexual and religious redemption) is right here at home. Who could help loving such a comedian!

"The petrochemical capitalist enemy . . . such a comedian": what sort of logic is at work here? If the speaker is serious about capitalism being the enemy, what does being a comedian have to do with it? Or *is* he serious? One thing, at least, is clear about this bizarre passage: Ginsberg's poetry is not mentioned once. Bellow's speaker praises Ginsberg not because he is a fine poet but because he is a "comedian," because he holds the "correct" political views (that is, he is obsessive about the hazards of American capitalism and oblivious to the outrages of Soviet Communism), and (in-

4 The story appears in the recent collection, *Him With His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories,* by Saul Bellow: Harper & Row, 294 pages, $15.95.

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credibly) because he is "psychopathic," a "screwball." At the end of this tribute, Bellow's speaker (although by this point it is clearly Bellow speaking and no one else) pays Ginsberg the most peculiar compliment of all:

> I . . . refuse to overvalue the erotic life. I do not believe that the path of truth must pass through all the zones of masturbation and buggery. [Ginsberg] is consistent; to his credit, he goes all the way, which can't be said of me. Of the two of us, he is the more American.

This from the author of *The Adventures of Augie March*![5]

This seems to be *the* way to handle Ginsberg these days—call him the Atomic Age Whitman, but sidestep, as much as possible, the question of whether his poetry makes the grade. James Atlas, in his review of the *Collected Poems* for *The Atlantic,* obviously finds the poems, on the whole, offensive and mediocre, but, rather than letting the chips fall where they may, comes up with an assortment of excuses for them. Yes, he admits, some of the poems are nothing more than pornographic records of Ginsberg's pederastic revels—but, "lurid as they are, they belong to the convention of the horny old poet celebrating the transient beauty of youth." Yes, a lot of the poetry is "stoned babble" and "there aren't many memorable lines in even the best" of it—but at least "it's never dull. Crammed with gossip, anecdotes, and confessions of sexual miscreancy, his garrulous, untidy narratives read like a good novel." Yes, "these poems are uneven, to say the least"—but so are Williams's *Paterson,* Olson's *Maximus Poems,* Lowell's *Notebook.* Amid all these clever rationalizations, Atlas manages to describe Ginsberg as the "heir of Whitman" and to allude to the poet's "Whitmanesque lines"—and, of course, to title the piece "A Modern Whitman."

Then there is Francis X. Clines (who is —fittingly, somehow—the *Times*'s White House correspondent), the author of a profile of Ginsberg published recently in *The New York Times Magazine.* Clines makes a point of saying that Ginsberg "carefully claims no large place in American literature"; but he adds that "his labor and style alone, *regardless of the esthetic judgments of later generations* [my emphasis], currently put him [sic] as a major working writer in the nonclassical tradition of Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams." What in the world does *this* mean? What it means, I think, is this: "Look, *you* know his poetry's terrible, and *I* know his poetry's terrible, but, heck, everybody knows that he's the modern Whitman, and who am I to buck the crowd?"

Such are the ways of personality cults. One of the many ironies of the Ginsberg cult is that this particular poet has profited hugely by his lack of originality. He began his career as a blatant imitator of Elizabethan poets, went on to become a rather faint xerox copy of William Carlos Williams, and finally settled on being a fourth-rate pseudo-Whitman. He has never learned selectively from his masters in the way most poets do—has never, that is, developed his own personal style by borrowing, in various subtle ways, from a number of poets; instead, he has simply copied styles wholesale. And, of course, to make the imitation worth the trouble, the former marketing research consultant has promoted himself more ingeniously than any American poet in history. By drawing attention to his combative, outrageous public personality and to his connections with Whitman, Williams, Blake, and other poets, Ginsberg has subtly steered the critics away from writing about this poetry as a literary phenomenon and has beguiled them into discussing him as a social

5 Interestingly enough, Louis Simpson—whose poetry, like Bellow's novels, has helped memorably to define the character of late twentieth-century America—says much the same thing at the end of the chapter on Ginsberg in *A Revolution in Taste* (Macmillan, 1978): "With his beard, bald head and intent brown eyes [Ginsberg] is definitely a personality, as American as apple pie and the flag."

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force, a symbol, an heir to a tradition. Clines, for example, describes Ginsberg as "the celebrity poet who once piped a flood of hippie humanity into Golden Gate Park in the 1960's on the strength of 'flower power,'" as "the poet of resistance who once could rile authorities with the single syllable 'om,' his mantra chant against the Vietnam War sounding through the Chicago tear gas of '68," and as "the symbol of social iconoclasm and doctored mind expansion, one of the first to sing brazenly beyond the closet of homosexuality." Ginsberg has created such a myth about his person, in fact, that many of the people who write about him seem shocked, and a bit disappointed, that he lives pretty much the way the rest of us do. Clines describes Ginsberg and Orlovsky looking pensively over their financial accounts, and says, "It is startling to witness this mundane anxiety in two of the surviving souls of the Beats, the artists who were so refreshing in thumbing their nose [sic] at the materialist preoccupation of post-war America." Jane Kramer suffered a similar rude surprise: "I'm not sure what, exactly, I had expected of Ginsberg, but I remember coming home from our first day together astounded by the fact that he had gone to the bank to deposit a check and then slipped into a local diner for some bacon and eggs." Imagine—Ginsberg with a bank account! Ginsberg handling *money!*

How can one explain the eagerness of such reputable members of the literary establishment to embrace the Ginsberg myth? Clearly, these writers and critics (not to mention the people who give out Guggenheims and major book awards) don't despise America; in some sense they *are* America, or at least its cultural representatives. But for some reason they are nonetheless comforted by the fact that somewhere in these states there is an Allen Ginsberg who *does* despise America—who has, in fact, spent most of his life thumbing his nose at everything they represent. One suspects that by admiring Ginsberg, many of these Establishment writers and critics are simply playing mind games with themselves. They know that they are bourgeois, and they know that being bourgeois is very unhip; applauding the revolutionary ravings of an Allen Ginsberg is one easy way to remove that bad old bourgeois stigma—for a brief interval, anyway—and to feel a bit like a madman oneself. What this amounts to, in other words, is radical politics as a form of entertainment—dissent-as-diversion. Those apologists for Ginsberg who are not attracted to the poet as a sort of polemical performance artist are, one supposes, simply living up to their notion of liberalism; for among many members of the intellectual and artistic classes in postmodern America, it is considered a sign of true enlightenment not only to tolerate but to celebrate the writer-as-radical—however bad his writing, however inane and irresponsible his radicalism. Few Americans have benefited more from such naïve, nonsensical "everybody-loves-a-radical" ways of thinking than Allen Ginsberg. What makes it all especially despicable is that although these writers and critics glorify Ginsberg for his supposed "candor" and "honesty," they cannot even be honest with themselves; for the only reason they are willing to cheer Ginsberg on is that they know very well that however much he propagandizes for the overthrow of the status quo, he will never achieve it. Applauding Ginsberg, in short, costs them nothing.

This is not to suggest, of course, that Ginsberg is harmless. Thanks to the support he has received from the literary establishment, he has been in a position to do—and *has* done—considerable damage to both American society and American literary culture. Besides being largely responsible for making drug use fashionable among this country's educated young (the tragic results of which hardly need to be explained here), Ginsberg has helped to promulgate the ridiculous notion, now regarded as dogma by all too many young people in the United States, that a poem is whatever you pour, unedited, onto a page. He has been the model for countless aspiring writers to whom the distinctive characteristics of a good contemporary poet are his disdain for

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literary tradition, his refusal (and often inability) to write in conventional forms, his lack of attention to matters of craft, his vulgar exhibitionism, and his preoccupation with knee-jerk political dissent. Ginsberg is, in short, the father of a generation of Americans to whom "culture" is a word most often used immediately following the word "drug"—a generation to whom poetry is something marked not by intelligence, sensitivity, and an imaginatively expressed apperception of natural order, but by incoherent egoism, fashionable anarchistic platitudes, and put-on paranoia. This is the legacy of Allen Ginsberg, the legacy to which Harper & Row has chosen to raise a substantial monument in the form of the *Collected Poems 1947-1980*. With all due respect to that venerable publishing firm, it is not a legacy to celebrate.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Memories of Rachmaninoff, Busoni, and Scriabin
by Alexander Pasternak
T. J. Clark & the Marxist critique of modern painting
by Hilton Kramer
The Motherwell retrospective *by Roger Kimball*
Delmore Schwartz & Randall Jarrell *by Bruce Bawer*
Caravaggio at the Met *by Creighton Gilbert*
Andrew Jackson in American history *by Fred Baumann*
Poems *by Alan Shapiro, James Ulmer, & Leslie Norris*

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Einstein's long march to Brooklyn

by Samuel Lipman

Brooklyn, though having lost a famous baseball team (and, before that, an infamous football team), need weep no longer: it now has the up-to-date Brooklyn Academy of Music, the national leader in the presentation of guaranteed media-succulent avant-garde theater-cum-dance-cum-"music" extravaganzas. Indeed, so successful has the institution been under the guidance of Harvey Lichtenstein, its President and Chief Executive Officer, that *Blam!*—the title chosen for an exhibition of Pop, Minimalist, and performance art at the Whitney Museum this fall—might have been thought to refer not to the famous 1960s (Roy) Lichtenstein cartoon painting but to the 1980s (Harvey) Lichtenstein Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Jokes aside, the Brooklyn Academy's record in presenting what it has chosen to call the "Next Wave" has been notable. A successful series sailing under this name took place in 1983; it featured eleven attractions, among them such icons of the new as dancers Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Carolyn Carlson, and Molissa Fenley, and theatrical *animateurs* Lee Breuer (of Mabou Mines fame) and George Coates. This year—with one exception—the presentation roster seemed a bit slimmer in hype value; on the whole the names of the artists—dancers Remy Charlip, Bill T. Jones, Arnie Zane, Mark Morris, and Elisa Monte, videographer Tim Morris, far-out saxophonist Richard Landry, and even composer Steve Reich—appeared to come out of the debate within the experimental art world rather than to stand perched, as their predecessors of the year before had been, on what might be called the brink of true media stardom.

The one exception, of course, was the presentation of the now-mythic—at least in some circles—*Einstein on the Beach,* the mid-1970s collaboration between composer Philip Glass and director-designer-visual artist Robert Wilson. The 1983 Brooklyn festival had begun with Glass's *The Photographer,* a kind of tribute to the nineteenth-century figure Eadweard Muybridge, who first proved by the evidence of the camera that a horse, when trotting, has all four hooves off the ground at the same time. This work, in its static artificiality, seemed to impress even the composer's fans as something more of a whimper than a bang. *Einstein,* however, was different. Through its use of the terrifying images associated with the scientist's work, it had managed, in two 1976 performances at the (rented) Metropolitan Opera House, to enter into the consciousness of artistically knowing New Yorkers. A measure of the fame the work has gained with the passing of time is that so many people now claim to have been present that these performances must have been given, not at the Met, but at Madison Square Garden. The choice of *Einstein* to close the 1984 festival with some twelve performances thus seemed a deliberate attempt to end with strength, to make up once and for all for whatever was less than exciting in the earlier part of the season. Artistic merit

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aside, the effort succeeded at the box office: *Einstein* seems to have sold out every performance, in the process enabling the entire festival to gross over a million dollars.

Apart from their collaboration on *Einstein,* Glass and Wilson have separately made enviable public careers. Glass is the most visible of the musical Minimalists, those composers who have found a way out of both the complexities, disintegrations, and unpopularity of post-World-War-II modernism. Following in the footsteps of La Monte Young and Terry Riley, and evolving on a parallel course with Steve Reich, Glass used the simplest harmonic materials, iterated at stupefying length, and orchestrated for instruments sometimes electronic and always electrically amplified. Prior to the mid-1970s, his music was instrumental, written for and performed by an ensemble led by him and bearing his name. The result of all this was a growing reputation on the New York downtown music scene and several LPs available only in the more sophisticated record stores. In Europe, too, where Glass had worked with Nadia Boulanger and first become inspired to follow his present course through association with Ravi Shankar, a cult began to form around him and his ideas. This cult abroad was perhaps most interesting as yet another example of the European readiness to be charmed by American simplicities at once eccentric and divine.

Whereas Glass's artistic education at the Juilliard School in New York and with Boulanger in Paris was nothing if not establishment, Robert Wilson was from the beginning of his theater career in the 1960s something of an autodidact. Born in Texas in 1941, he had almost graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in business administration when he decided to come to New York to study architecture; though he did take a degree in it at Pratt Institute and even served as an apprentice with an architect, his interests lay more with the visual arts, and more specifically with body movements. For him, such movements were not "dance" but rather a means toward freeing blocked impulses and capacities. He had worked with handicapped, deprived, and disturbed children to support himself, and in the process developed an aesthetic of slow-motion gesture and action, wherein each detail carried a portentous but usually nonexplicit, quasi-symbolic meaning.

When Wilson's therapy-induced movements were grafted onto his background in architecture and his time spent in painting in New York during the yeasty mid-1960s, the result was a theatrical conception of painterly stage designs, massive constructed sets, and wordless dance, all unfolding without very much action but at heavenly length. Wilson's titles for his stage works all seemed to suggest more content than the works themselves made any attempt to provide: *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* (1969), *Deafman Glance* (1970), and *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973). All were huge stage pageants using for the most part untrained actors and dancers who did Wilson's bidding more through the force of his personality, deployed during unlimited rehearsal time, than through any professional experience of their own. The critics—especially those of the avant-garde stripe—were interested, and audiences here and abroad attended in enough numbers to convince private and governmental backers that Wilson was indeed onto something.

Wilson likes to call his earlier works "operas," though the music that accompanied them was, by common consent, little more than trivial, even for those critics whose standards were anti-profundity. In this regard the collaboration with Glass on *Einstein* awakened expectations—which many critics later found wholly fulfilled—of a Wagnerian "Gesamtkunstwerk," that is, a unity of music, theater, and dance in which the aesthetic whole was vastly greater than the sum of its parts. Whatever the justice done in this instance to the wooly formulation ascribed to Wagner—his great *oeuvre,* after all, demonstrated nothing if not the primacy of music—the general feeling after the first performances of *Einstein* was that the multi-media avant-garde had at last come of age.

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Even for those who were enthusiastic in saluting *Einstein* on its first appearance, the creative results from Wilson and Glass working separately thereafter—they had entered upon a period of strained relations that precluded their further collaboration for the time being—fell short of complete satisfaction. Wilson, for his part, retired to Europe, where funding, mostly from state sources, was easier to find than in America. He conceived and staged several less ambitious works on the Continent, and even turned his busy imagination to making video clips capable of being shown in any order and at any length. Then Wilson devoted the major part of his attention to a project grandiose even for him, an extravaganza that was to be the centerpiece of the cultural offerings at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. It was designed to do nothing less than sum up the entire human world-historical experience.

In any case, *the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down* was first conceived by Wilson as an agglomeration, lasting twelve hours, of six related theater pieces with music; the six parts were to be produced (and financed) in six different countries, then shipped to Los Angeles, where their assembling was to be funded by the Olympic Arts Committee and presented at the Shrine Auditorium. Though individual segments had been produced in Rotterdam, Cologne, Rome, and Minneapolis, their putting together at the Olympics defied even the financial abilities of the doughty Robert Fitzpatrick, President of the California Institute of the Arts (a school founded some years ago with Walt Disney money) and Director of the Olympic Arts Festival. The work was scaled down to eight hours, and further cuts were envisioned, but to no avail. Despite more than three million dollars from the producing countries, two hundred thousand dollars from Los Angeles, and almost a million and a half dollars from donations and projected ticket sales, the entire project was scrubbed amidst massive publicity. The French Communist Party daily, *l'Humanité* (as quoted by *American Theatre,* the magazine of the non-profit Theatre Communications Group) wrote that the cancelation was "a crime against the spirit."

Whatever the expert status of *l'Humanité* in matters of the spirit, the segment of *the CIVIL warS* produced last spring in Minneapolis suggested a different conclusion. There, in the small auditorium of the Walker Arts Center, one could hear and see a collection of entr'actes from *the CIVIL warS*. Wilson called these "knee plays" because they serve as the "joints" between the work's five acts.

It is doubtless less than fair to judge an art work lasting twelve hours (some estimates go as high as sixteen) by intervening excerpts alone. But a passage in the program notes, presumably written by Wilson, explicitly argues for these entr'actes' existing on their own: "*the Knee Plays* is like a substory that is woven through the tapestry of *the CIVIL warS* . . . . they serve in some cases as an introduction to the larger scenes, but on their own they tell a story together that can be seen separately." The knee plays include music composed and led by David Byrne (of Talking Heads fame) and played by seven musicians, six brass and one percussion. The narration was written and spoken by Byrne as well. The scenario and the direction were solely by Wilson; the design and lighting were by Wilson and a group of (presumably subordinate) collaborators. The choreography for the evening was by Suzushi Hanayagi, variously described in the program as "one of Japan's foremost classically trained Kabuki dancers" and as "one of Japan's foremost classical dancers." Rehearsal time for the Walker performances had apparently been generous: rehearsals had begun (after much planning here and abroad) fully one month before the opening.

There is no point in attempting to describe the story line of the knee plays, for it is part and parcel of Wilson's aesthetic that there is none. Instead, the watcher is confronted by a motley assortment of symbols drawn from the stock inventory of emotionally charged detritus floating about in every

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half-educated intellectual's mind. On this occasion, the material consisted of a tree becoming a boat becoming a book and then ending up once again a tree. More consequential for the viewer was the heavy oriental influence on the proceedings, an influence mostly enshrined in the choreography and in the *mise-en-scène*. To my Western and doubtless parochial eyes, it all seemed stiff, arbitrary, and unconvincing. The movements of the dancers, full of jerks and bodily poutings, seemed like some clumsy imitation of Japanese *samurai* movies on late-night television. The sets included bird-puppetry carried around the audience and a clumsily constructed boat that insisted (on the night I attended) on repeatedly falling apart. It was all creaky, and its minimalism extended well beyond its conception of its craftsmanship.

A special word, I suppose, is necessary to describe the music and the narration. Byrne's composition—it must be remembered that he wrote only the music for the knee plays: the music for the five major acts of the whole work came from other composers, including Glass—was a combination of charmless hymn tunes and the minimalist overworking of already thin material. And the narration, at least on the level of literary interest, added nothing to the evening's vitality. Seemingly heavily drawn from the deadpan monologues of performance artist Laurie Anderson—another icon of the new avant-garde artistic sensibility—Byrne's words would have been laconic had there not been quite so many of them. A quotation from the opening of the first knee play defines the curiously androgynous camp effect:

> Today is an important occasion.
> She thinks that she must wear the right clothes.
> The right combination of clothes
> . . . will make her lucky.

A quotation from the beginning of the fourth knee play adumbrates an element of schizoid alienation never very far from Wilson's work:

> I thought that if I ate the food of the area I was visiting
> That I might assimilate the point of view of the people there
> As if the point of view was somehow in the food
> So I would make no choices myself regarding what I ate.
> I would simply follow the examples of those around me.

The reception by the audience of Wilson partisans in Minneapolis fell short of delirium on the night I attended. Even *The New York Times*'s usually ebullient (at least on this subject) John Rockwell seemed to have some difficulty getting his praise started:

> Mr. Wilson is a creator of massive spectacles, and sometimes his more intimate work has looked schematic and simplistic. There was a bit of that during the first few "knee plays" on Thursday. But then Mr. Wilson exerted his spell, or one began to comprehend what he was about.

For my part, I found the whole effect both boring and amateurish, with remarkably little to show onstage for the month-long efforts of something like fifty people. Indeed, so aimless did everything seem that I could not help wondering later whether the key to both the aridity onstage in Minneapolis and the spectacular financial demands that caused the cancellation of the Olympic Arts Festival presentation was not simply Wilson's oft-trumpeted insistence on developing the final form of his works in rehearsal. This implies an emphasis on casualness and at the same time an inevitability of outcome too profound to be communicated to the participants in words. In artistic matters, after all, the line separating egoistic self-indulgence and merely not knowing what one wants is often a fine one indeed.

In the meantime, while Wilson had been preparing *the CIVIL warS,* Glass was devoting himself to opera. The first major fruit of his attempt to write for conventional opera

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houses was *Satyagraha,* a set of tableaux drawn from Gandhi's experiences in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. The work was commissioned by the city of Rotterdam and first performed by the Netherlands Opera in 1980; the American premiere took place in 1981 at Artpark in upstate New York; the New York premiere was given at the Brooklyn Academy in the fall of the same year. *Satyagraha*'s "libretto" was written by Glass and his associate and friend Constance DeJong, with sets and costumes by Robert Israel, and staging by Hans Nieuwenhuis.

Satyagraha's vocal text is completely drawn from the Indian *Bhagavad-Gita* and sung in Sanskrit, a language known neither by Glass nor by the participants in the performance. By Glass's own testimony he does not wish the audience to be distracted by understanding. The work's three acts are each overseen onstage by a different benevolent, totemic figure: Tolstoy, the Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The mimed (in slow motion) Gandhi material is, of course, heavily fraught with anticipation of the American civil-rights struggles of the 1960s. The music is in Glass's repetitious and mostly motoric style, this time with the motor set on *Molto adagio.* Only the score's ingenious (though Broadway-commercial sounding) orchestration—and a moving theme at the end seemingly drawn from the apotheosis of Tchaikowsky's *Swan Lake*—saved the evening from the total tedium Glass's admirers call ecstasy. In fairness, it must be added that ten thousand tickets were purchased for the work's five sold-out Brooklyn performances.

Satyagraha was the second of what Glass calls his "portrait" operas, *Einstein* being the first. The third, and latest, of these is *Akhnaten,* a work based on *Oedipus and Akhnaton,* a 1960 book of psychoanalytic-historical speculations by Immanuel Velikovsky, a best-selling author famous for *Worlds in Collision,* an attempt to prove that the Red Sea actually did part. The work was first produced in Germany early last year. Its American performance was the result of a co-production by the Houston Grand Opera and the New York City Opera. *Akhnaten* thus arrived at the New York State Theater in November and, like all of Glass's recent operatic works, promptly sold out.

As far as my own experience of *Akhnaten* is concerned, I must confess that I only managed to last through the first act. Musically the work began with an endless arpeggiated A-minor chord. The number of notes in the arpeggios varied and sometimes quick repeated chords—also in A minor—were sounded. The stage was full of piles of sand, to which scantily clad Egyptians added water to make what one presumes were monotheistic mudpies; the eponymous hero throughout behaved in the manner of what Andrew Porter called in *The New Yorker* a hermaphrodite, a description which seems both kind and understated. The first act ended with several minutes—Andrew Porter, again displaying British caution, thought it seemed like only five—of what can only be dubbed a romp around the pyramid. At the end of the act the audience was either too stupefied or too moved or too exalted to do more than give a few rattlings of applause, which sounded like nothing so much—or so little—as the fluttering of aged pigeons' wings.

Donal Henahan in the *Times* and Peter Davis in *New York* hated it all. Henahan, no slouch with a cutting phrase, summed up the musical side of the evening this way:

> *Akhnaten* . . . is not a work whose music asks to be listened to seriously. Despite the publicity that Mr. Glass's works have received, his operas to date add up to little more than pageants with backgrounds of continually repeated, barely varied sound patterns. They stand to music as the sentence "See Spot run" stands to literature . . . .
>
> Considered strictly as an almost primitively tonal protest against the self-defeating complexity of most contemporary music, *Akhnaten* may act as a tonic, if you will forgive the pun. But it is one more example of going-nowhere music . . . .

Davis made his verdict into a prediction of the composer's future: "Glass may have

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reached the end of his limited resources and can think of nowhere else to go." Speaking for advanced opinion, Andrew Porter wrote respectfully and at some length on the opera, describing the work's sources and blaming the unsatisfactory nature of the outcome on the problems of the production. Porter even described the music, but the closest he could come to saying he liked it wasn't really very close at all:

> The only section of the score I've seen, the Akhnaten-Nefertiti love duet, is two hundred and seventy-five bars stuck in an arpeggiated E minor, colored by passing notes and added notes. There are pedals and some slow, occasionally dissonant counterpoints in the form of climbing chromatic scales. The lovers' voices shine out above this in a slow chorale-like melody, crossing, overlapping . . . and ending each phrase on a unison, octave, or fifth. The metres and the phrase lengths vary. It's a carefully composed, carefully proportioned stretch of music.

My own reaction to the third of *Akhnaten* I was able to endure will come as no surprise. It was rising boredom, passing through the various degrees of irritation to fidgets and anger. Is it that I was merely reacting to the presence of a strong creative personality? I hardly think so. Rather it was just the normal response of a Diogenes trying to find, not an honest man—that would by comparison be easy—but a performance of Glass or Wilson that would justify the hype. Neither man by himself had been able to bring it off. Would a collaboration succeed where each had failed?

So in the long run it all came down to *Einstein on the Beach* in Brooklyn. For months the buildup had been intense, and a veritable Niagara of printed material on the pair, all clearly produced with the cooperation of their busy subjects, had prepared the scene. The sets and the costumes from the 1976 performances had been stored, and so were available to re-create the original production. The lighting design, by Beverly Emmons, and the sound design, by Kurt Munkacsi, were repeats of 1976; many of the musicians, too, were back for the revival. The 1976 choreography (except for one dance at the beginning of Act I) had been the work of Andrew deGroat, a dancer much favored for his ability to twirl endlessly in one place; in the present performances, Lucinda Childs (who had been a lead dancer in the 1976 production and had choreographed the beginning of Act I) was the choreographer for the entire work. Several actors repeated their earlier roles; and most of the words they spoke were carried over from 1976.

The performance I attended was billed as the opening, though several performances, called previews, had been given earlier. While the news could hardly have been a total surprise, it still came as something of a shock to be informed by a sign in the lobby that the performance would last four and a half hours without intermission. Fortunately, this disciplined call to duty was leavened by a generous concession printed in the program:

> As *Einstein on the Beach* is performed without intermission, the audience is invited to leave and re-enter the auditorium quietly, as necessary. The food service will remain open during performances.

With comfort and nourishment thus assured, it was possible to settle down to the performance. Though the opera was scheduled to begin at two o'clock, the music seemed already to have started when I arrived ten minutes early. This music consisted of low organ-like tones, only slowly changing, coming out of an electronic console in the orchestra pit. Anyone not familiar with the recording of Glass's score made after the Met performances in 1976 might have been pardoned for assuming that this quasi-doodling was just pre-performance tuning.

Several minutes later—but still before the official starting time—the audience's filing into the hall was matched onstage by the appearance in front of the curtain, but to

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one side, of Childs and Sheryl Sutton, the two dancer-actresses who were to be on-stage for almost the entire length of the marathon. They sat down in front of a table in the two chairs which had been prepared for them; their costumes, clearly chosen to awaken memories of Einstein's dowdy dress, consisted of men's pants, open-necked white shirts, and suspenders. Both wore telephone-operator headsets, complete with microphones. As they sat they began to make slow, laborious motions with their hands and arms, giving the impression of being in considerable pain. At the same time they began to count numbers very slowly; sometimes other words were audible, including the fascinating phrase "Take a Toyota." As this action went on before the closed curtain, a chorus, also dressed in Einstein costume, began to file stiffly into the orchestra pit. The chorus began to sing numbers as well.

Suddenly—it was now about 2:10, and the sold-out house was still only about two-thirds full—the curtain went up, and the music, which up till now had been quite delicate, came alive with an enormous amplified rush. Childs, repeating her dance from the 1976 production, kept up a constant movement diagonally from the back of the stage to the front, and then back again; her dancing was frenetic, as was the music. From the side a crudely schematic steam locomotive, looking like an enormous child's toy, advanced ever so slowly to the center of the stage. On the back curtain a narrow band of light, like some fugitive element from a Morris Louis or Kenneth Noland painting, descended from the top to the floor.

Now a violinist dressed—surprise!—like Einstein appeared on an elevated platform in the pit, and began to play an endless solo consisting of slow single notes, mostly in scales. From the many loudspeakers could be heard nonsense containing the name "Mr. Bojangles." The male judge began, in a sententious tone, to tell a story about a modest woman—so modest that she wore a blindfold when bathing—who gave a speech in Kalamazoo on the rights of women. After describing how the woman wanted to lead her listeners in singing the national women's song, the judge went on to quote her as recommending that women should tell men, if they don't behave right, to take "their kisses right back where they came from."[1]

Now there was a huge dance sequence, illuminated by a vaporous persimmon light, which proved for me by far the highlight of the entire event. Danced by the members of the Lucinda Childs Dance Company, the choreography seemed a brilliant evocation of the post-World-War-II New York dance scene in all its athleticism, buoyancy, and optimism. Though it all went on too long, and though Glass's music kept up a constant drumbeat of triviality, one could not help feeling that dance, as brought to Brooklyn by Lucinda Childs, had staked its claim to full artistic stature.

From this point on things went downhill. There was a jail scene featuring what looked like two male dancers, one of whom was stated in the program to be a woman. In this scene Childs went on muttering lines

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1 Interestingly, this somewhat ambivalent pitch for women was not in the 1976 recording, and presumably not in the 1976 production either. In its place was an equally sententious speech devoted to what I suppose must be called equality of sexual choice:

> In Paris there is a number of young men who are very beautiful, very charming, and very lovable. Paris is called "the city of lights." But these young men who are very beautiful, very charming, and very lovable, prefer the darkness for their social activities . . . .
>
> One of the most beautiful things of Paris is a lady. She is not too broad, bordered with smiles, and very, very, very pleasant to look at. When a gentleman contemplates a lady of Paris, the gentleman is apt to exclaim "Oo la la," for the ladies of Paris are very charming. And the ladies of Paris are dedicated to the classic declaration, expressed in the words "L'amour, toujours l'amour!"

Whether or not the avant-garde is attempting to tell us that feminism has replaced free sexuality as a cause I leave to the reader to determine.

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typical in their combination of nonsense and alienation:

> I was in this prematurely air-conditioned supermarket and there were all these aisles and there were these bathing caps you could buy that had these kind of Fourth of July plumes on them that were red and yellow and blue and I wasn't tempted to buy one but I was reminded of the fact that I had been avoiding the beach.

As if to show that the Third World guerilla movement is still with us, she picked up an automatic weapon and pointed it first at her colleagues onstage, then at the orchestra pit, and then finally at the paying customers.

Perhaps I tired, or perhaps the profusion of visual material and incessant music unmatched by any real story line made connected notetaking impossible. Much of the rest hardly seemed worth writing down. There was a long scene with a couple standing on the platform of a railway observation car, and another scene in which a long horizontal bar, lighted in front and meant to represent a bed, was raised ever so slowly by a cable at one side so that it became vertical; it was then raised into the flies. Toward the end of the afternoon, a little missile, perhaps two feet long, flew across the front of the stage on a guy wire against a sky-blue backdrop. This was succeeded by a nuclear explosion, and then by a new drop curtain which in the center depicted a mushroom cloud, on the top right an American bomber, and on the top left a detailed explanation in words of technical aspects of an atomic blast.

So here at last was the point of the whole work. Einstein, the shabby, music-loving, humble philosopher-scientist had come home to roost with a vengeance. The putative disaster of the century—the threat of annihilation which produces the alienation of the person—can now be seen to rest at the feet of the greatest scientific mind of the century. If this is what comes of logical thinking, I suppose the argument would run, who could condemn Robert Wilson for putting on a melodrama without a story line, and Philip Glass for writing hours of music using only a few harmonies and even fewer harmonic and rhythmic devices?

The end of the opera, on the stage as in the recording, found Childs and Sutton sitting on a bench, not touching, as a bus driver intoned drippy words expressive of young love. It was all frightfully maudlin, and the final words seemed risible indeed:

> Once more her voice was heard. "Kiss me, John," she implored. And leaning over, he pressed his lips warmly to hers in fervent osculation . . . .

At the final curtain almost all the seats in the house were still occupied, and the applause was deafening. John Rockwell wrote in *The New York Times* the next morning:

> I find it constantly involving and almost religiously moving. For thsoe who feel the same, the performances this week in Brooklyn will be experiences to cherish for a lifetime.

For those who do *not* feel the same, the problem will be to understand just what took place in *Einstein* and why this work appears to have such a powerful effect on certain people. The verdict on *Einstein* as an art work must be that, as a collaboration, it represents a vastly more interesting work than either has been able to achieve on his own. As music heard apart from the stage spectacle (and at low volume on one's home phonograph), Glass's score seems both harmless and even appealing, as if it were quite content to function as a sentimental pop anodyne; heard in the visual context of Wilson's shameless exploitation of contemporary anomie, the music takes on a character no more musically impressive, but vastly more evocative of a certain kind of cultural despair. As stage spectacle, Wilson's aimless cramming together of overworked metaphors is tied together and even integrated by the frenzied electronic sameness of the music. The result doubtless is the putting into art of a unique moment in modern culture: the moment in the 1970s when it had be-

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come clear to all the participants that the best, if not the only, causes were those undertaken strictly for oneself.

The social characteristics of the audience for *Einstein* are, I think, quite clear. Affluent, relatively educated, moderately successful in the professions, old enough to know about the 1960s, too young to know that the events of the 1960s had a historical context beyond personal concerns. The other side of this concentration on self is a loss of faith in a transcendent order, a loss which hardly renders less necessary the satisfaction of human needs for comfort and reassurance. It is about this situation that Stephen Holden wrote in the *Times* on the Sunday of the *Einstein* opening (in an admiring article titled "The Avant-Garde is Big Box Office"):

> Whether mystical or nonsensical, the idea of evoking a totality of experience is the essential thrust behind works like "Einstein on the Beach". . . . But that reality isn't a rarefied perception of truth and God toward which high art has traditionally directed audiences, but a multiplicity of images and sounds, from cartoons to Mozart. Its appeal may come from its attempt to embrace not only the familiar but—everything we don't know and can only imagine.

Doubtless *Einstein,* like other products of the counterculture and its fossil remnants, has a political cast attractive to its viewers. But those who are determined to find in this ideology manifestations of an orthodox left-wing, state-oriented disposition will be wrong: the politics of *Einstein* and its kindred is that beguiling, irresponsible variety of anarchism so endemic in an educated middle class which, no matter how existentially alienated, still wants someone else to pay for its amenities, whether these amenities be urban redevelopment or cultural offerings.

In this regard, it is significant that the requisite financial support for the entire range of Brooklyn Academy "Next Wave" offerings does not come from the audience, which pays only a part of the cost of mounting the various events. Even the huge gross for *Einstein* failed to cover the costs of reviving a previously paid-for production. It is significant, too, that it was not the audience that was to cover the expenses of *the CIVIL warS* at the Los Angeles Olympics. Indeed, in neither case was the lion's share of the money to come from private patrons of vast means. Rather the money was to come from corporations, foundations, and, most especially, governments. In the case of *the CIVIL warS,* most of the necessary money had already come from foreign governments via their own lavish support of culture. In the case of *Einstein* a glance at the acknowledgments page in the 1984 Next Wave souvenir booklet discloses that the first seven donor names saluted are the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Howard Gilman Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Pew Memorial Trust, and AT&T.

If this analysis of the audience is correct, one can understand why *The New York Times,* Gotham's mission to (and trading post for) the Yuppies, is in the forefront of the publicity wave for the Next Wave festival, and also why *The Wall Street Journal,* that former bastion of bourgeois respectability, has published material extolling Glass on tour as well as the doings in Brooklyn. Whether the *Journal*'s writer is experimental music critic (and *Village Voice* regular) Gregory Sandow or opera and dance buff Dale Harris, the tone is one of wonder and gratitude for the new—and popular—riches being proffered. Clearly these newspapers have identified an audience, not just for a certain kind of culture, but for themselves.

Given the current success of *Einstein,* two questions about the movement it exemplifies remain to be discusseed: its future as box office and its future as art. Despite all the claims made for the burgeoning commerical success of this branch of the avant-garde, the fact remains that its productions, from solo appearances to fully staged events, require hefty subsidies from non-profit sources. The one example usually cited as showing the

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financial potential of this material is the hit English single "O Superman" by Laurie Anderson. Though it briefly was near the top of the English rock-singles charts and inspired Warner Bros. to sign her to a contract here, it has proved incapable of replication either by Anderson or any of her colleagues and imitators. The costs necessary to put these events on, whether in lighting, staging, dancing, or audio, are onerous, and audiences for intellectually trendy attractions are notoriously fickle. Furthermore, there is no sign that this material is capable of appealing to an uneducated mass audience on the one hand or to traditionally oriented music lovers on the other. It must be added, too, that any artistic product so tied up with the particular historical and personal experiences of its devotees tends to find it hard to attract new audiences who must come fresh to the offering.

None of the above considerations, of course, has any necessary relationship to artistic validity and potential. Whatever the stature of *Einstein on the Beach* as an art work in itself may be, it seems clear enough that it has not had progeny as successful as it was immediately upon its birth. It is equally clear, it bears repeating, that neither Wilson nor Glass, working separately, has been able to achieve the success on his own that they have earned together. Once again, we may take the word of John Rockwell that at least so far *Einstein* is *sui generis*: for him, "This Wilson-Glass collaboration is the major achievement in the performing arts of the minimalist esthetic." Wilson and Glass may, it is conceivable, decide to work together again on something new; it should be borne in mind, however, that sequels which have as their only purpose the repetition of an earlier success, usually fizzle.

And so, the 1984 Next Wave Festival in Brooklyn is history. But the grants go on, and the yards of favorable publicity already generated guarantee no shortage of future events in Brooklyn and elsewhere. Whether one calls *Einstein on the Beach* performance art or multimedia, there can be little doubt that it symbolizes the nearest we have yet come in this country to an art form crafted for the tastes of what has been called the new class, that group which, we are told, alone possesses the skills to run our society. The new class certainly will have progeny; will its art?

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Dufy among the pattern painters

by Jed Perl

The Holly Solomon Gallery is best known as a champion of Pattern and Decoration: the outsize, brashly colored pictures which take their kitschy images from flowered wallpaper and 1950s "moderne" design. Pattern-and-Decoration paintings look bold, up-to-the-second, and there is something appealing in the artists' fondness for the slightly deranged variations on great design ideas to which modern mass culture has sometimes given birth. The paintings, though, have no magic. They feel listless, enervated, no doubt because the artists are grabbing at effects without transforming those effects into aesthetic experiences—experiences of form. What Holly Solomon stands for might be called feel-good painting: it jazzes up the flatness of modernist pictorial space without giving any meaning or new beauty to that kind of space.

Holly Solomon has now mounted a show of works by Raoul Dufy—the French painter, best known as a Fauvist, who died in 1953 at the age of seventy-five.[1] There is, in a sense, nothing surprising in this move, for Dufy himself has for years been regarded as a feel-good artist. Dufy, like the Holly Solomon artists, is unabashed in his fondness for the decorative arts: many of Dufy's paintings take as their subject the decorative ambience of a room, and at least in the 1910s and 1920s he devoted a great deal of his energy to working as a designer—primarily of fabrics, but also of pottery. Dufy's work has an easygoing affect; he doesn't hammer in his points. But even if you understand what Raoul Dufy is doing at Holly Solomon, the thought of it can make your head spin. Dufy at Holly Solomon is rather like a case of mistaken identity, as if the hostess had taken the guest's brand of wit for her own. What you feel at Holly Solomon is not a dialogue but two monologues—Holly Solomon's and Dufy's—and they are being carried on at cross-purposes.

The Pattern-and-Decoration artists are like happy kids, throwing over the severity and evangelical purism that is an aspect of the modernist heritage—and they sense, rightly, something like this anti-purism in Dufy. They are attracted as well to the strain of good, madcap fun in the Matisse paper cutouts, which have for years been mentioned in relation to Pattern and Decoration. With the paper cutouts one does not feel that Matisse always knew exactly where he was going: the forms keep veering from nature fragments into streamlined, Arpish abstractions, and the space is at moments pictorial *(Souvenir of Oceania),* or drawing-like (the blue nudes), or decorative *(Chinese Fish).* Amidst the fun of the paper cutouts there is, though, something that may make the Pattern-and-Decoration artists a bit uncomfortable: a quality of ebullience under discipline that recalls, in an odd sort of way,

1 "Raoul Dufy" was on view at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York from November 2 through November 24.

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Mondrian—especially the Mondrian of *Broadway Boogie Woogie.* Matisse seems to navigate through a mass of associations with nature, mass culture, exotic art without ever letting the associations exactly come to the surface. For all their immediacy the paper cutouts feel distanced, Olympian.

Whatever Dufy is, he is not distanced; and that must be what the Pattern-and-Decoration people really like about him. His pictures have the sense of naturalistic atmosphere that Matisse and Picasso more or less overthrow. Dufy's imagination is pictorial in ways that are too rarely acknowledged, but structure is not something that he particularly emphasizes. For Dufy the act of creation does not have to be presented in hyperbolic tones; though his means are exposed, he has a bit of the premodern desire to keep the artist's struggles in the background. Dufy is not after a blindingly new vision of art. What he is pushing through to is something that has been around for a long time. Thus Dufy's revelations have a calming rather than an agitating effect. It's the escape from agitation—the idea that an artist might be after a sense of what *is* rather than what can be—that lies at the heart of Dufy's present appeal. Dufy at Holly Solomon is the untroubled conservative of modern art: supremely chic, and never forgetting to pay his respects to the *ancien régime.* This is not the worst way to think of Dufy, but it isn't the best way either.

The Holly Solomon Gallery mounted a small, far from complete, but very beautiful show of Dufy. The exhibition included none of the early Fauve or Cubist works and concentrated on the "unknown" Dufy: the artist's late paintings—rarely seen now in New York—and decorative art. Though Dufy sometimes achieves effects of great beauty in his decorative work, his fabric designs were not, I think, represented at their best at Holly Solomon. Dufy's abstract fabric designs struck me as actually rather weak, certainly not to be compared with the designs that Sonia Delaunay was doing around the same time. The scale of the patterns is not startling in the way Delaunay's are, and at least the fabrics at Holly Solomon—both the abstract and representational designs—have about them something a bit tight and congested. Fabrics, of course, are not meant to be looked at in frames on walls: maybe these Dufy designs look better on bodies or hung in curtains. But the decorative arts at Holly Solomon would seem to indicate that Dufy's greatest strength as a decorator rests not in the modern mass-market medium of the printed textile but in the older conventions of the tapestry—with which he became increasingly involved in the 1930s—and the handmade ceramic.

Dufy's soft-edged, freewheeling planes of color translate perfectly into the overlapping threads of traditional French tapestry. He accepts tapestry for what it is—an ornament to the wall that was never meant to draw us in the way a painting does—and he glories in the way tapestries take off from the idea of a covering for a wall to give the surface a special radiance. In *Les Trois Grâces (l'Oise, la Seine et la Marne),* with its big, busty heroines, and *Amphitrite,* another sea fantasy (he loved the sea), Dufy just revels in the idea of high decoration—decoration fit for a king—that is at the heart of the tapestry aesthetic. Dufy has the blessed good sense not to worry about what the relevance of tapestries might be for our time. By accepting the art on its tried-and-true medieval and Renaissance terms, he avoids the pitfalls of most modern tapestries, which, in trying to justify the form—to give it a new importance—end up with things that look like little more than glorified area rugs.

What Dufy loves about the decorative arts is the way the old artisans could stay deep inside a form, not weaving some commentary around the idea of decoration, but just pushing a teapot or a fabric design through to its wildest—but also its most logical—conclusion. That is how Dufy works in his designs for a group of chairs upholstered in Beauvais tapestry, two of which were shown at Holly Solomon. Following through on the conceit of a set of like objects—plates, wallpaper panels—that are decorated with a

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group of variations on a single theme, Dufy created for these chair backs different views of Paris. Dufy's designs are flights of fancy rather like the scenic escapades of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century decorative art, only in Dufy's tapestries Paris is a modern city complete with Eiffel Tower—and there is an especially happy feeling in the way he has, without missing a beat, infused a contemporary scene with all the beguiling charm of a rococo garden. Decorative ideas just trip off of Dufy's imagination. In a ceramic planter in the shape of a swimming pool with a little stepped approach he takes on yet another design tradition: the calligraphic, blue-and-white delft pottery of Holland. Looking at the little seamaidens who cavort around the sides of the planter, you are sure that all Dufy wants to do is experience, through his own hand and brush, how it feels to be one of those wonderful delft painters. Dufy does it every bit as well as they did—which is very well indeed—but you don't feel that he is trying to outdo them or burlesque them. It's an act of homage: pure love.

Dufy's involvement with the decorative arts is not an isolated event in modern history. His efforts fit right into the series of experiments—ranging from the arts-and-crafts idea in late nineteenth-century England to the Bauhaus school of the 1920s—that were organized in response to the crisis in the decorative arts brought on by industrialization. In Russia this reaction took the form of an alliance between the Constructivist avant-garde and the Communist revolution; in Holland there was the De Stijl group; in Germany, the Bauhaus. These were all group efforts, illuminated with a glow of communal ideals. In France, where the romantic community of artists never made much headway against the supremacy of the individual, it was the single artist who attempted the alliance of modernism and design.

Both Dufy and Sonia Delaunay created luxury couturier items and acted as mandarins of modern decoration—Dufy worked with Paul Poiret, Delauney opened her Boutique Simultanée. They are, actually, two artists whose careers and reputations have certain similarities: both were modernists who felt the pull of decoration; in the 1930s they both made a vigorous return to pure painting; and both artists have, unjustly, now been reconsidered more in the light of their decorations than their paintings. With Delaunay, who was caught up in a radical reconsideration of pictorial structure, the line—although it is there—may indeed be fluid. With Dufy the line between decoration and painting is very clear. Although his paintings are rich in decorative effects, Dufy is never interested in the kind of flattened-out decorative space that you see in Persian miniatures, in some Matisses, and in most Sonia Delaunays: Dufy holds to a fairly traditional idea of painting—as an airy box fit for people to walk through.

Perhaps it's because Dufy took his time to figure out exactly where he stood in relation to modern art that he became such a self-assured artist in his later years. Both his Fauve and Cubist phases—despite their radicalism—lack in nerviness; Dufy won't throw caution to the wind. Likewise, there is something workmanlike in the paintings of the 1920s, where a range of pure hues—greens and blues and purples—are laid on in thick strokes and give an effect that resembles conventional modeling in tones. The one Dufy from the 1920s at Holly Solomon—a landscape of Vence—was fine to look at, and had one brilliant touch: the use of the bare canvas to convey the radiant light of the road at the center that leads our eye into the hilly landscape. But it is true of the paintings of the 1920s, as of the paintings of the Fauve and Cubist periods, that while they are often completely convincing, it is hard to think about them for very long without having one's mind wander to other artists who have done similar things. I believe a Dufy lover will, perforce, be someone who loves the late work—the paintings of the 1930s and 1940s. Only there does Dufy's big-hearted way with a motif come completely to the fore: the brimful color keeps Dufy's

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fast, incisive drawing—including some of the more enjoyably fussy calligraphic effects—in buoyant animation in much the way a great composer uses special qualities of sound to keep a sentimental tune floating high up in the air.

In Dufy's late work color is used very broadly. Some canvases are saturated with a single tone from edge to edge; in others a couple of hues or families of hues are flung against one another: blue against yellow, blue-gray against orange and salmon. The color bursts out of the canvas and seems to float toward the viewer. These are very open paintings in which the colors, unfurled in great, washy banners, are just held in check by the flowing, darting movement of Dufy's black and colored lines. The atmosphere of the late paintings rises out of the easy yet charged relation of lines and color planes. Dufy's greatness in these late paintings rests in the way he manages to create, despite the rather generalized types of elements he uses, a palpable, distinct quality of atmosphere and object. Dufy's open-work draftsmanship, which is often mistaken for something sloppy, actually has an almost Oriental ability to summarize complex forms and movements through simple shapes. The wit of Dufy's line is the wit of the virtuoso who cuts through problems as if they were thin air. His tiny, scrawled figures are not clichés: if you look close, for instance, at the musicians in *Le Quintette* at Holly Solomon, you will realize that they evoke precisely how a bow is held, how a head presses forward toward the sheet of music, how a foot rests firmly on the ground. Perhaps what confuses people about late Dufy and makes them call it trashy is the way Dufy weds a taste for pure narrative and description—for traditional pictorial values—to loose-limbed composition and zingy, twentieth-century color.

Dufy's name summons up an image of thick, sensual brushstrokes and rococo revival French doors opening on views of the Riviera. These are important elements of his work; but one of the surprises, when you take a closer look at Dufy, is to find at the heart of his later painting a certain austerity. It is this quality that informed the best pictures at Holly Solomon. In a tiny composition of five walnuts, each little form—some cracked open, some complete—is described with clear, unambiguous strokes of brown paint against a light gray-blue ground: a work of pure, unaffected description that has about it much of the spirit of Van Gogh's paintings of shoes. The drawing of the ship in *Le Cargo Noir (II)*—just a few lines scratched with the back of the brush—has a like concision, a sort of inspired and spatially sophisticated version of children's graffiti. Dufy is capable of a simplicity that pulls the viewer up short.

I was particularly glad that the Holly Solomon show included a painting from the series of interiors of the studio at Perpignan in the South of France. It is in these paintings—each shows a corner of a room, wedge of window, and slice of exterior view—that Dufy pares his art down to essentials and achieves some of his most intensely felt effects. Within the fixed perimeters of the studio pictures Dufy regards a limited but changing range of elements—easels, portfolios, pictures, sculptures—which through their varying arrangements push and pull the space into a variety of different configurations. In some of the paintings the swirling arabesque of a sculpture of a standing nude creates a whirlpool-like effect; in others a variety of differently colored portfolios creates a rhythm of colored rectangles shuttling across the space. The painting at Holly Solomon, *Atelier aux Trois Chevalets,* is one of the simplest: three easels—one with a small painting—shoved against the back wall and a cast of a torso on a table at the left. The space—open and unemphatic—is all a matter of loose, insouciant color washes (yellows, salmons, pinks) running across the walls in opposition to the gray-blue of the torso and the Indian and Venetian reds (Dufy was addicted to these colors) of certain outlines and edges. Some of the paintings in the studio series hint, in a casual sort of way, at an allegory of painting: you may see a still life and, on an easel, a painting of a

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still life and think, "The Art of Painting." But the studio pictures never have the declamatory, oratorical style one expects with allegory. *Atelier aux Trois Chevalets* is, even within the rather subdued mood of the studio series as a whole, an especially unemphatic painting. It's like one of those pieces of music in which nothing much happens and you are just carried along by gentle waves of sound.

II

The story of the disappearance and revival of the work that Dufy created from 1915 or so until his death in 1953 recalls in many respects the history of the work of de Chirico —another modern, of a very different stripe, whose later work was lost sight of and then found again. Dufy and de Chirico each lived a long time and, with their avant-garde years behind them, went on to create mountains of pictures, drawings, prints. These have never been completely forgotten, but you have had to cope, if you wanted to see this later work, with the somewhat tarnished aura of the wrong galleries and auction sales—places that have a slightly moldy air of compromise and debased taste. The surroundings always made you feel that these were artists who'd gone wrong, and when you saw their work you were supposed to wonder, and feel almost embarrassed by the interminable decades they had insisted on living through, as if Paris in 1905 or 1910 or 1915 hadn't been enough. Of course the surroundings did not matter if you knew what you were looking for, and you could often be delighted or moved by their work. But no matter what capacity the paintings had to move you, they weren't newsworthy. The glow of popularity that you always want to feel around pictures you love wasn't there. You felt proud and a bit mad about loving them. Ten years ago, liking Dufy, late de Chirico, or late Picasso was a bit like loving the later work of Corot or the nineteenth-century American landscapists Kensett and Cole twenty years ago: a dissident pleasure that carried with it whiffs of doubt about how the history of art was being written. You were improvising on your own, and if you thought that Kensett had moments that could compare with Courbet, it was a secret thought, one that you knew a lot of people would find absurd.

In the last few years most of those reputations that, for better or for worse, had been stuffed away forty or eighty years ago in the capacious drawers of some chest marked "Outgrown: Discard" have been taken out again, given an airing to eliminate the must and mothballs, and shown off, proudly, in public. Yet when you look around to see what it all means, this gaudy new display, you may keep feeling that you just can't figure it out. People talk of the voracious dealers, who must find some new-old thing to sell; of the historians, looking for new topics for Ph.D.'s; and there is, everywhere, the glamorous talk of cracks in modernist history, a great parade watched now as it slips into a quicksand of emendations. Things are said to be happening: changes, revisions, new perspectives. This is roughly the import of Robert Rosenblum's preface to the new history, *19th-Century Art,* that he has written in collaboration with the late H. W. Janson, who contributed just before his death the first drafts of the chapters on sculpture. The last section of *19th-Century Art,* which covers the years 1870-1900, is the first systematic attempt to rewrite part of the history of modern art in the light of the revivalism of the past two decades, and, as such, it gives more of a clue to what the new view of the last hundred years amounts to than anything else around. Although Dufy's revival must be understood within the context of post-1900 art, there is much about what is happening just now to Dufy, to de Chirico, and to others that can be learned from looking at Rosenblum's vision of the late nineteenth century.

Like many texts, *19th-Century Art* is built around fairly extensive discussions of a limited group of reproductions, and the ideal reader—probably a college student—is guided from image to image and idea to idea. This is about as good a way to organize a text as can be imagined, and Rosenblum—

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who is a professor of fine arts at New York University and has written on late eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century art—has a real gift for the genre. He barrels through each picture and can, seemingly no matter what the subject, pull off a paragraph that is chock-full of nifty metaphors, bold analogies, and wonderfully apt bits of description. The book is a big, rollicking valentine to the new art history of the 1970s—the art history that is fed up with the old standards and has a sweet tooth for the softly modeled forms of James Jacques Joseph Tissot, Frederic Leighton, and Fernand Khnopff. That is, at least, what you will feel when you first open the book for there are some pretty weird selections among the reproductions. Albert Joseph Moore's *Sapphires* (1877), Jean-Léon Gérôme's *L'Eminence Grise* (1874), and Leighton's *Flaming June* (1895) are right up there among the color plates with Degas and Cézanne and Van Gogh. Among the black-and-whites are many academic machines of truly numbing proportions: Jan Matejko's *Stephen Báthory After the Battle of Pskov* (1872), for instance, is more than eight by ten feet of curdled Rubens.

When you start reading you may be ready for anything, but the oddest thing about the book is that Rosenblum is very careful in what he says about all this stuff. At the beginning of the chapter on 1870-1900, in a segment covering images of war, the reader is taken on a rather wild excursion that starts with Manet, then goes through Meissonier, Daumier, Menzel, Böcklin, and a Russian, Vassilii Vassilievich Vereshchagin, with great speed. It's characteristic of Rosemblum's text that he will run a discussion of an artist whose modernity is beyond dispute into a discussion of an artist generally thought to be academic: it all happens so quickly and the elisions are so graceful that you don't quite know what hit you. Typically, the glue that holds Rosenblum's far-flung artists together is subject matter, and this can get rather sinister as when Monet's paintings of poplars from 1891 are discussed with a painting by Jean Delville of *Orpheus* (1893), a high camp affair with a decapitated head floating on a lyre on a blue sea. Of the Monet, reproduced full page in color next to a full-page color reproduction of the Delville, Rosenblum says, "We are set afloat in a world no more measurable than Orpheus's blue waters." This is pretty bizarre, but the strangest thing about *19th-Century Art,* which becomes clearer the more you read of it, is that Rosenblum is unwilling to come out and say that Menzel or Delville is an artist who can really bear comparison with Manet or Monet. Instead, the "new" artists and works are referred to in distanced, coolly appraising terms: "most prominent," "admired," "more overtly intelligible than in any of Cézanne's figural compositions," "ambitions . . . more public and literal in character," "impeccably erudite reconstructions." It's rather like the way Dufy is referred to: as a successful decorator or a major figure of jazz-age Paris.

The main claim that Rosenblum makes for his late nineteenth-century artist "discoveries" is that they worked hard, were famous. Or they will be, sneekily, connected to an established modern, as when we are told that the poet Swinburne discussed Whistler and Alfred Moore "in comparable terms," or that Van Gogh found inspiration in the work of Hubert von Herkomer: status by association. But the big sections are still devoted to the Impressionists and Cézanne and Seurat and Van Gogh and Gauguin, and the first name mentioned in the 1870-1900 chapter is Manet and the last is Picasso—a most traditional cast of characters! The final section of Rosenblum's book seems rather like the same old modern party—a great party, everybody would agree—only now crashed by a lot of new guests. The new guests are talked up, connections are made—Boldini, a painter who is fun to look at, is made faintly ridiculous by being mentioned in the same breath as Cézanne and Seurat—but everybody seems to know that it is the old guests who really count, and that if they left, the party would be a dud.

Despite their new status that is sort of what one feels about Dufy and de Chirico

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as well: they've been asked in, but their presence doesn't really matter a bit. The curious thing about the Dufy revival is that nobody seems especially shaken up by it. As in Rosenblum's *19th-Century Art,* business just goes on as before, except that we now draw along with us a new baggage of fripperies and frills. The reaction seems to be, "Oh, yes, now we like that, too"—and then back to the usual. A number of the artists who contributed to the catalogue of the Dufy show at Holly Solomon made the observation that they began to like Dufy out of pure perversity and then warmed to him. Dufy becomes like some especially weird trifle picked up in the back room of the bric-a-brac shop of modern art: an adornment to the taste of the clever fellow who ferreted it out.

III

You can laugh at the really bad paintings that have found a place in *19th-Century Art,* and you can feel rather sick about their inclusion, too. But this doesn't mean that revivals are just foolish games. After all, what does and doesn't matter in art is a strange business, a source of wonder and speculation. Art must be felt, but how we feel it and what it makes us feel are not engraved in stone. This is where revivals, among other things, come into play. The revelations we expect from art are not so much revelations of subject as revelations of feeling: of new ways of feeling about feeling. It's possible to believe that scarcely more than a dozen artists ever count in a century, that all that matters in the history of art are a few profound transformations in feeling—in which case there won't be a place for Dufy. Or you can look in art for the expression of the multiplicity of human experience, in which case you will find that many more artists matter —Dufy, perhaps, among them. Probably everyone has known the pull of both attitudes.

Modernism—taken in its classic form—is one of those great, pure lines: a few figures who eat up the whole horizon. And in the way of all such great traditions, it is true and also something of a lie. Robert Rosenblum, like the people at the Holly Solomon Gallery, has probably been trying to sniff out the lie; but I think he's held back a bit—afraid perhaps to really confront the skeletons he is digging up. The lie in that lovely modern line has developed over time, as achievements that had initially not all that much of a fixed relation to one another have become locked, retroactively, into a single evolutionary course. There's a point where discernment drifts into exclusivity; this is the thrust of some comments that Edmund Wilson made in an essay he wrote during the 1950s about T. S. Eliot. Wilson was thinking of Eliot's ideas about poetry, but he could as well have been thinking of some theories of modernist art—such as Clement Greenberg's—when he asked, "What *is* this 'Main Stream' of poetry that [Eliot] is always talking about, which he apparently identifies with Pound and himself and with the poets who more or less derive from them, and the price of divergence from which, as Eliot seems to imply, is irretrievably to be lost in the sands?" After running through a whole batch of specific objections to the "Main Stream," Wilson concludes; "One feels that the Main Stream, though it sprang from aesthetic heresy, is now regarded by Eliot as something like the 'Main Line' that runs west from Philadelphia and on which all the well-established and well-thought-of people are supposed to have their residences." There's always in the mainstream—in poetry, in painting—the danger that values become detached from experience and turn into arbitrary standards.

Wilson had begun his career with *Axel's Castle,* as a mainstreamer bringing the message of literary modernism to America, but at the time he made these comments about Eliot he was finishing *Patriotic Gore,* a masterpiece of anti-mainstream literary history. Perhaps Wilson's observations here contain elements of an old man's disappointments at the way the world has gone, but I think he also understands something important about the calcification of traditions. A drift toward parochialism lies hidden within every mainstream, which is why the main-

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stream itself, even if it is a big part of the truth, is never the whole truth. Revivals have at certain times acted as a check on the mainstream. The Greek and Gothic revivals, by bringing to the fore values alien to the European Renaissance ideal, played an extraordinary role in the invention of modern art. But revivals, because they are acts of love, are also perilous. To revive—to breathe new life into something—is a process of imagination that can bring the past into a new kind of focus, or can turn the past into a fantasy version of contemporary taste. (Robert Rosenblum may have set out, in *19th-Century Art* to get at the lie in the mainstream, but actually what he ended up doing was mucking up the true part.) The great revivals—even, I think, when based partly on misunderstanding—give a bigness and freshness to our view of the past. The present—always crazy, mixed-up—lends a vigor to what could be the contemplation of dusty, antiquated stuff and brings to the remnants of other times a feverish intensity. What revivals are all about is the re-experiencing of lost or overlooked achievements in ways that genuinely alter, however slightly, the whole structure of relations.

The revivals of interest in Dufy, late de Chirico, and certain late nineteenth-century Academic painters are mini-affairs when compared to the full-scale revivals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of fifth-century Greek and medieval European culture. Like the big revivals, though, these recent ones are in part mirrors of changing tastes and ideals. An admiration for Dufy seems these days a badge of one's liberation from the supposedly austere and politicized ambience of the art of the 1960s and 1970s. Depending on your view, Dufy is either a vapid apologist for the world of boutiques and catered dinner parties or a silver-age poet of capitalism. Discussions of Dufy seem always to include at least a few mentions of his connection with the *haute bourgeoisie,* and the generally well-heeled world that he depicts. He's represented as an artist so charged up with bubbly good spirits—so high on life—that it's not even worth figuring out what he has in mind since he probably had nothing much in mind to begin with. From what I can see, Dufy arrives at Holly Solomon less as a revelation than as a confirmation: a confirmation of the fun-house sensibilities of artists who have little in common with him but look into his work and see a mirror of their own attitudes—which become, thereby, vintage goods. The Holly Solomon show invites us to regard Dufy's paintings and decorations all at once, as if they arose from the same set of assumptions and pressed toward similar sorts of resolutions: Dufy becomes a happy-go-lucky guy—the fool of modern art.

Bouquets, violins, boats with sails catching the wind; of course all this matters in Dufy. Dufy has a way of grabbing hold of his smiling subjects as if they were just plain fun to contemplate, and this doesn't fit with the typical modern worries about subject matter. Yet Dufy's mental world is not as one-way as many would like us to believe. These pictures, composed of detached lines and planes of color, suggest a rococo Cubism—and the very idea of such a thing hints at a complex love-hate relation with modern times. Dufy doesn't live in some fantasy land; consider all the attention he lavishes on the plain hard work of farmers, waiters, and musicians. His reactions to glamorous race tracks and elegant furnishings have just a bit of the acerbic, eyes-wide-open quality that you get in Proust's descriptions of women's hats and elegant receptions. Of course, Dufy's end-of-an-age world never approaches the mythic proportions of Proust, but Dufy is more sensitive to the moral implications of social style than many of his detractors and supporters would like us to believe.

When Henry Geldzahler, in the catalogue of the Holly Solomon show, compares Dufy's modernism with Maurice Ravel's, I feel a rare largeness of view being brought to the Dufy revival. This telling analogy is a bit of high-class revivalism that brings a misunderstood artist into a new light and rearranges things a little in your mind. But

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Dufy—like the late de Chirico, like the late Picasso—still remains too fenced off from the modern movement. I'd like to see the mainstream shaking just a bit more than it is. There were paintings at Holly Solomon —the tiny *Les Noix* and *Le Quintette,* the larger *Atelier aux Trois Chevalets* and *Le Cargo Noir (II)*—that made me feel again, as I always feel when I see good Dufys, that he is capable of a clarity of feeling and an openness of form all his own. When you see Dufy's largest and most ambitious work, the great mural *La Feé Electricité,* made for the same 1937 World's Fair that gave birth to Picasso's *Guernica* and now on view in the Musée National d'Art Modern in the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the glowing bigness of the effects—the easy, flowing balance of color and line—recalls Léger and the Delaunays: the grandest moments of modernist mural design. When you see Dufy's free copies after Renoir and Titian and his sea goddesses out of Pompeii, you know that he is in touch with some very deep vein in the Western tradition. Dufy is an artist who right now is being plugged up by being exhumed as a decorator, by a brand of revivalism that says, "Okay, you can come on board, just don't rock the boat." The real revivals, though—the kind that energize and change the mainstream in ways that are more than cosmetic—are rock-the-boat revivals. Sometimes I feel that when Dufy's paintings are just allowed the space they really need to be seen, they will strike more and more people as touching something deep inside—and Dufy will, in his little way, finally rock the boat.

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A catalogue raisonné for Arthur Dove

by Hilton Kramer

To mark the publication of Ann Lee Morgan's *Arthur Dove: Life and Work, With a Catalogue Raisonné,*[1] three New York galleries—Dintenfass, Mathes, and Salander-O'Reilly—recently joined in mounting what was described as "an overall view" of Dove's paintings, watercolors, drawings, and collages.[2] It is welcome news that at long last—nearly forty years after his death—we have been given a *catalogue raisonné* of the work of this distinguished American painter. Unfortunately, the publication itself is no masterpiece. Its design is pedestrian, its paper and printing are just barely respectable, and its prose is of that academic, lackluster variety which is guaranteed to discourage the interest of all but professional researchers and the most ardent devotees of Dove's art. Among knowledgeable insiders, moreover, there are already some complaints about omissions and factual errors, and on that score as well as others we are likely to hear more in the future. But the basic task would appear to have been begun, anyway, in establishing a reliable guide to the artist's oeuvre and to the literature that has gathered around it since Dove first exhibited his work in the Salon d'automne in Paris in 1908, and for that at least we can be truly grateful. And all the more so, of course, because serious, comprehensive scholarship in the field of early American modernism is still the exception rather than the rule.

In a more perfect world, to be sure, it might have been expected that one of our museums would mount a full-scale retrospective on this occasion. But the last retrospective, organized by Barbara Haskell for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, took place scarcely more than a decade ago, and there was probably little chance of such a show being organized so soon again. Despite the claims that are often advanced on Dove's behalf, he remains an artist peculiarly resistant to stardom of any kind. Even for those who esteem his work and feel a special affection for it—and this writer certainly counts himself among them—Dove refuses to be "big." The task of placing him in the art of his time—and of ours—therefore remains a delicate one. Even his "originality" can be a problem, for it can easily mislead us into expecting something that Dove's work rarely, if ever, delivers on. He *was* in some sense an original, yet a recognition of his originality does not always help us to grasp his quality. It may even lead us away from it, for his originality may not finally be the most important thing about him.

Perhaps the place to start in any attempt to define what is special about Dove is with the statement he made in the catalogue of his 1929 exhibition at the Intimate Gallery

1 *Arthur Dove: Life and Work, With a Catalogue Raisonné,* by Ann Lee Morgan: University of Delaware Press. Paperback exhibition edition, $32.00; hardcover, $60.00.

2 The exhibition was on view in New York from November 3 to December 29, 1984.

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in New York: "There is no such thing as abstraction." This is the statement which Roxana Barry places at the opening of her Foreword to the special exhibition edition of Ann Lee Morgan's *catalogue raisonné.* In this statement Dove went on to say that "[abstraction] is extraction, gravitation toward a certain direction, and minding your own business." Now what, we may ask, did Dove mean by this? I very much doubt that he was concerned to make some large general statement about art. Clearly he was talking about his own work, and what I believe he was saying about it was: There is no such thing as abstraction *in my work.* He was offering us instruction in the reading of his pictures. If this is indeed the case, then what are we to make of Roxana Barry's gloss on Dove's statement?

> As one of the first abstract artists [she writes], he did not mean that there was no such thing as non-objective painting, but rather that the idea of "abstraction" as a process was irrelevant. His goal was not to transform real objects into non-objects, his intention was not to remove things from their associations and transform them into a meaningless design—quite the reverse. Dove's intention was to reveal the essence of a thing, of an idea, and to portray it whole, timeless, transcendent.

It seems to me that something important to our understanding of Dove has been muddled in these remarks. For what else but *process* could Dove have had in mind when he spoke of abstraction as "extraction, gravitation toward a certain direction"? Process—the process by means of which a sensation derived from nature is transformed into a pictorial idea—goes, in fact, to the very essence of Dove's art. (As for producing "a meaningless design," what serious artist has ever been interested in *that*?) Dove's statement does not strike me as the utterance of an artist who is intent upon separating his work from its sources in nature, but just the contrary. He is concerned to remind us of its special debt to nature. Barry is thus correct in pointing out that Dove's "intention was not to remove things from their associations," and elsewhere in her Foreword she acknowledges that "Dove perceived nature as a prime mover," but in discussing his relation to abstraction she seems not always to understand the implications of her own observations.

The truth is, Dove's attitude toward abstraction was a highly equivocal one, and we cannot hope to place him as an artist until we have acknowledged this attitude of equivocation and given it the importance it deserves. When the artist declared in 1929 that "There is no such thing as abstraction," he appears to have been issuing a warning about his own work, cautioning us not to mistake *his* painting for the kind of abstract art which by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century was an established and recognized component of the European avant-garde. (Its position in American art was by no means so firmly established.) Dove obviously felt that his own artistic interests lay at a considerable distance from that mode of abstraction, and he was right to do so. He was never a consistent or programmatic abstractionist. For much of his career, he was no abstractionist at all. He remained from beginning to end a painter whose every sensation was tethered to his immersion in the experience of nature. We shall be a lot closer to grasping the essence of Dove's sensibility if we recall Paul Rosenfeld's observation, in *Port of New York* (1924), that "there is not a pastel or drawing or painting of Dove's that does not communicate some love and direct sensuous feeling of the earth." Virtually all of Dove's own statements about his art confirm this view.

To accord this observation the central place it has earned for itself is something of a problem, however, for anyone attempting to cast Dove in the role of avant-garde hero—the American counterpart, as it were, to Kandinsky as a pioneer abstractionist. Ann Lee Morgan wrestles with this problem in the commentaries she has written to accompany the new *catalogue raisonné,* yet

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she cannot be said to have added much to its clarification, either. She would like to claim Dove for the role of pioneer abstractionist, yet she knows very well that the documentary record is by no means clear and unequivocal on this question. Reluctant to affirm what she cannot prove, she is also reluctant to give up the idea. Her solution —a curious one, to say the least, for the author of a *catalogue raisonné*—is to come down firmly on both sides of the question.

The key paintings in this regard are the six small works, which—solely on the basis of "stylistic considerations," as Morgan acknowledges—she believes to have been painted in 1910-11. (One of them, *Abstraction No. 3,* was included in the Mathes Gallery exhibition.) The date 1910-11 is assigned to them in Morgan's *catalogue raisonné* with no indication that it might be questionable. In her essay on "The Art of Arthur Dove," however, she clearly states that "There is no documentary evidence for the date of these six oils." She also acknowledges that "Their sketchy character and the fact that the artist did not exhibit them during his lifetime"—Dove died in 1946—"support the likelihood that Dove considered them studies rather than finished paintings." Exactly where the title of *Abstraction* comes from, moreover—whether it was Dove's or some posthumous designation—Morgan does not say.

Notwithstanding all these unanswered—and in some cases, unanswerable—questions, Morgan cannot resist the temptation to assign Dove an exalted role in the annals of the international avant-garde. "If the 1910/11 date is correct," she writes, "the abstractions were surely original in concept. The very notion of a purely abstract art was unknown before that time, although in Germany in 1910 the Russian-born Wassily Kandinsky was experimenting at the borderline of abstraction. It is virtually impossible that Kandinsky's earliest abstract work directly influenced Dove's," etc. But can Dove's so-called *Abstractions* of 1910-11, even assuming that date to be correct, be regarded as examples of "a purely abstract art"? Or are they too more accurately placed "at the border-line of abstraction," and if so, on which side of the borderline are they to be found? Morgan does not say. She simply presses ahead with the statement that "Whatever the exact date of the six oil abstractions and whatever Dove's awareness of Kandinsky's development of an abstract art, the important point is that each of these artists 'invented' nonillusionistic painting for himself." She then goes on to observe—accurately, in this instance—that "other artists probably did the same . . . . The more evidence that comes in, the more it seems certain that the tendency to abstraction was so much in the air by 1910 that any number of American and European artists experimented with abstraction around that time."

Well, there were many things "in the air" around 1910, and the "tendency to abstraction" was surely one of them. In attempting to chronicle the emergence of abstract art in the second decade of the century, the many artists who can be said to have "experimented with abstraction around that time" are not without interest, of course. But the artists who really count in this matter—count, that is, in the historical development of abstract art—are those whose work and whose ideas decisively shaped the course of abstraction by making it a compelling artistic option. One of the things we can say with certainty is that Wassily Kandinsky was one of these and Arthur Dove was not. We are surely on the wrong track with Dove if we try to nominate him for the international avant-garde sweepstakes of 1910, or indeed any other year. He was never that kind of painter. His horizons were smaller, his ambitions more restricted, his sensibility homelier and more earthbound. It does violence to the essential spirit of Dove's art to impose such an overscale, world-historical role upon it, and it raises expectations which Dove's paintings simply cannot fulfill.

Take that little painting called *Abstraction No. 3* which was shown at the Mathes Gallery in December. It measures nine by ten and one-half inches. It is a perfectly delightful picture, filled to the brim with the spe-

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cial tenderness and poetry that Dove often brought to paintings of this sort. But can it really be called abstract? It does not look like an abstract painting to me. It is an étude drawn from nature. Its image is clearly derived from a close-up look at the way natural light, as it filters through a network of tree branches, transforms our vision of a landscape into unexpected patterns and irregular shapes. It is an image at once earthy and autumnal, and entirely faithful to its keen perception of light and shadow in nature. It is, in fact, an example of the kind of nature study for which Dove felt a deep, personal affinity. He never really departed from this mode of perception, however "abstract" the results may sometimes seem to us to be. He never cut the tie that bound his art to that "direct sensuous feeling of the earth" that Paul Rosenfeld defined as the key to his sensibility.

It is only when we have abandoned the effort to make Dove over into something that he wasn't—a leader of artistic thought, the founder of a "school," a hero of the avant-garde, etc.—and accept him for what he was—an extremely gifted but essentially isolated and highly individual figure who remained an outsider as far as the major events in the art of his time were concerned—that we can begin to do justice to his actual achievement. Perhaps the Stieglitz connection has misled us in this matter. Stieglitz *was* a hero of the avant-garde—an artist-*animateur* who did all the things that Dove had neither the means nor the temperament to do. He was also Dove's lifeline to the cosmopolitan world of art and ideas that Dove himself rarely, if ever, frequented. That lifeline was extremely important to Dove, but it also measured his distance from the center of things. We tend to think of the Stieglitz circle as an avant-garde group on the European model, but was this in fact the case as far as the painters were concerned? (It was probably more the case for the photographers whose work was published in *Camera Work.*) Aside from O'Keeffe, who was married to Stieglitz, how often did the painters in his circle actually see Stieglitz, or indeed each other? Whatever may have been true for the other painters, Dove appears to have been very little involved in the art life of New York. He was either too busy scratching for a living or too isolated on his farm or his houseboat or in his home in upstate New York to participate in New York art life in any sort of regular way. He kept up with the avant-garde magazines, he followed the writings of Kandinsky, Apollinaire, and other avant-garde thinkers, and he was regularly in touch with Stieglitz, who remained his dealer. But one has the impression that Dove had very little opportunity to see at firsthand what was going on. What little he saw of the work of other artists seems to have had no discernible influence on his own. In Paris, in 1908, he underwent an eager conversion to the whole Post-Impressionist aesthetic. He was clearly drawn to its emphasis on vivid color and bold design, and he painted a few striking pictures that reflect that moment of discovery and excitement. (One of the finest of these pictures, *Still Life Against Flowered Wallpaper,* painted in 1909 while Dove was still in France, was shown at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries in December.) But he abandoned this mode almost as quickly as he had taken it up. Thereafter everything in the work of Dove's maturity appears to be self-generated. Ann Lee Morgan dredges up everything she can in the way of identifying roots, sources, influences, etc., but in the end offers nothing more definitive than a parcel of speculations and probabilities. Fairfield Porter was closer to the mark when he spoke of Dove as an artist "independent of tradition and independent of the capital."

I sometimes wonder if the Dove scholars haven't overlooked an important negative element in his development by paying so little attention to his work as an illustrator. Dove felt himself enslaved to that work while he was doing it for a living, and he gave it up as soon as he could—at great financial sacrifice. But what an artist rejects often plays a part in his development too. The whole subject of illustration and

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the role which its conventions played in the work of the American modernists of Dove's generation is one that remains to be studied. Certain artists of that generation—Demuth, Sheeler, even O'Keeffe in certain phases of her work—did not hesitate to make use of illustrational devices and materials in their art. Others, like Dove, were clearly intent upon removing all trace of the illustrational mode from their work. This meant, among much else, that Dove's painting was governed by certain self-imposed prohibitions —prohibitions that amounted to a kind of "morality." There is thus no "society" in Dove's painting, no urban scene, no city lights or mechanical dynamism, nothing that denotes the immediacy of the man-made modern world except the way the paintings themselves are conceived and executed. Only in certain of his collages does Dove lift the ban on illustration. Yet the satire in those collages—in the ones that are satirical; not all of them are—is directed against the world where the standards of illustration are thought to hold sway. In such work Dove adopts the stance of a small-town country boy mocking the city slickers. It is as if the world is seen as divided into three parts—art, nature, and society—and Dove is intent upon siding with the first two against the depredations of the third. In the presence of nature, the satirical impulse disappears, and so does the illustrational motive. Nature, like art, belongs to what is sacred. Nature is not to be illustrated but lovingly evoked, its spirit distilled in shapes and colors and images of light which give permanent form to the emotions that this sacred experience affords at its moments of most profound engagement. Whether and to what degree the resultant form is finally abstract or representational hardly matters; it is usually, in any case, some combination of the two. Whether abstract or representational, the forms in Dove's paintings tend to be organic, or biomorphic; they have something of the fluidity and dynamism of nature itself. In their execution, in the way Dove characteristically builds up his surfaces in swirls of light or juxtaposes density and transparency, he clearly found an analogue to what he loved in nature. Nature and art were thus conjoined in the very process of painting. What he sought and found in art was, in short, a visionary "equivalent" for what it was that most absorbed him in nature, and his pursuit of those "equivalents" attained at times an almost erotic intensity.

"Equivalents" was, of course, Stieglitz's name for his famous photographic studies of clouds—the most radical, most "abstract" pictures in his oeuvre. In the several texts which Ann Lee Morgan has written for the new *catalogue raisonné,* the point at which she draws closest to the inner spirit of Dove's painting is, I believe, to be found in the paragraph which she devotes to a comparison with Stieglitz's concept of the "equivalent." Unfortunately, she promptly drops this promising subject without exploring it, and she muddles even the basic point by bringing in T. S. Eliot's notion of the "objective correlative," which was something very different. The importance of the "equivalent" for an artist like Dove—whether or not he called it by that name—was that it provided the means by which art could be linked to nature without recourse to literal description or illustration. It was never conceived of as a means of rejecting nature in favor of pure abstraction.

If this matter had been sufficiently understood, Morgan (and her readers) might have been spared the unrewarding task of having to explain why it was that a subsequent generation of American abstract painters—the Abstract Expressionists of the New York School—took so little interest in Dove's work. Morgan is troubled about this lack of interest. It seems to her to constitute some sort of injustice. But why should it? The interests of the Abstract Expressionists were completely different from those of Dove and his generation. The former had nothing like the latter's interest in or feeling for nature. Abstract Expressionism was deeply tethered to the urban experience, for one thing, and it looked more to myth, to automatism, and to psychoanalysis for its inspiration than to

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nature. Stieglitz's notion of the "equivalent" simply doesn't apply to Abstract Expressionism, and it is a mistake to suppose that it does. Yet it is not difficult to see why Morgan feels so compelled to conclude her essay on "Context and Theory" on this false note. She wants desperately to place Dove and his art in a significant historical context, and Dove resists her every attempt to do so. She wants to place his art beside that of Kandinsky, Picasso, and the Surrealists in the earlier phases of his development, and beside that of Gorky, Rothko, et al., in its later phases. Dove, she feels, has been "slighted," and she means to do him justice. She simply cannot accept the fact of Dove's isolation from precisely the kind of history that, as an historian of modern art, obviously means the most to her. The result, of course, is a kind of unintended injustice. The artist whom Fairfield Porter spoke of, correctly, as "independent of tradition and independent of the capital" is stripped of his independence and made to look like a victim. It is an odd fate for an artist to suffer at the hands of so ardent an admirer.

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Poems *by Donald Justice & James Aitchison*

Villanelle at sundown

Turn your head. Look. The light is turning yellow.
The river seems enriched thereby, not to say deepened.
Why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

Or is it that Americans love failure?
One used to say so, reading Fitzgerald, as it happened.
(That Viking Portable, all water-spotted and yellow.

Remember?) Or does mere distance lend a value
To things?—false, it may be, but the view is hardly cheapened.
Why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

The smoke, those tiny cars, the whole urban milieu—
One can like *any*thing diminishment has sharpened.
Our painter friend, Lang, might show the whole thing yellow

And not be much off. It's nuance that counts, not color—
As in a late James novel, saved up for some long weekend.
Why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

How frail our generation has got, how sallow
And pinched with just surviving! We all go off the deep end
Finally, gold beaten thinly out to yellow;
And why this is, I'll never be able to tell you.

—Donald Justice

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American scenes (1904)

—after Henry James

1. Cambridge in winter

Immense pale houses! Sunshine just then and snow
Lit up and pauperized the whole brave show—
Each fanlight, each veranda, each good address,
All a mere paint-and-pasteboard paltriness!

The winter sunsets were the one fine thing:
Blood on the snow, one last impassioned fling,
The wild frankness and sadness of surrender—
As if a city ever could be tender!

2. Railway junction south of Richmond, past midnight

Indistinguishable engines hooting, red
Fires flaring, vanishing; a formless shed
Just straggling lifewards before sinking back
Into Dantean glooms beside the track,

All steam and smoke and earth—and even there,
Out of that little hell of spurts and hisses,
Came the first waftings of the Southern air,
Of open gates, of all-but-bland abysses.

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3. St. Michael's Cemetery, Charleston

One could depend on the old cemetery
To say the one charmed thing there was to say.
A seaward low horizon seemed to carry
Hints of some other world beyond the bay,

The sun-warmed tombs, the flowers. Each faraway
Game-haunted inlet and reed-smothered isle
Spoke of lost Venices; and the South meanwhile
Had only to be tragic to beguile.

—Donald Justice

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Notes from the hill

A way

One way is through the woods.
Light drips from the leaves
and floats in oozy layers
of air too thick to breathe.

Where the swaying greenness ends
the world dips and heaves
and rights itself. The air
is thinner, cooler on the hill.

Rain

After the first few drops
there's the faint ringing sound
of rain on dry soil
and then that smell of earth's quenching,
of the hill's slaked drought.
A smell like a great laundering.

These walls

These drystone walls,
terrain for stoats
and empty fertiliser bags,
no longer listed
in title deeds,
seen only by
bank holiday birdwatchers
and lost German campers—
these walls
crumbling
back into the hill
remind me more
and more of my poems.

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Noises

Branches creak where there are no trees.
A cow grunts on a hillside with no cattle.
Voices laugh, a car door thuds shut,
the horn sounds lightly once and then the car moves off
along a road that doesn't exist.

Noises on these glittering nights in December
circle the hill on wavelengths of moonlight and frost.

Mist

It can come down at any time.

I sit like a cold chrysalis
in my grey cocoon
and wait till it gives me back
my sight and my hearing.

When the mist clears
and I can walk again
I feel a freshness on the hill;
whatever the time of day
it feels like early morning.

Hill mist leaves a taste in your mouth,
a mingling of air and water and earth.

It can come down at any time.

Without warning it can come down
at any time, and without end.

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Stone

Year after year the rains and the freezings and thawings
wash away layers of soil.
Gravel goes rattling down the flooded gullies.
When the land dries out at the end of May
more stone has been laid bare,
more knuckles and shoulder blades of stone
have broken through the hill
like bones from a hundred shallow graves.

—*James Aitchison*

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Letter from Salzburg

The new Berio-Calvino opera

by Dana Mack

When Richard Strauss, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Max Reinhardt founded the Salzburg Festival in 1917, they envisioned both a monument to the genius of Mozart, the city's favorite son, and a stage for the innovative efforts of contemporary artists in music and theater. These seemingly disparate goals can be easily understood in light of the success with which these artists reconciled traditional art forms with modern ideas and idioms. They viewed their work as contributions to a continuous, living cultural tradition. Luckily for them the public received their work in the same spirit in which it was conceived, and found it good.

But few twentieth-century artists, even in the early 1920s, enjoyed so fortunate a relationship to the audience as did Salzburg's founding fathers. Though many artists whom we identify as aesthetic modernists often professed their debt to the past, the most salient characteristic of their work was its break with tradition—a break often so radical that it meant a breakdown in communication between artist and audience.

The effect of this breakdown on Salzburg was massive. Because modern artistic production failed to excite audience interest, the original Salzburg idea was never realized. Faced with the task of balancing its accounts, and able to depend on little more than moral support from an impoverished interwar Austrian government, the Festival became a place to perform accepted masterpieces in an accepted way.

Of course, more than financial considerations determined the Festival's unadventurous programming in the interwar years. Infused at its inception with the eighteenth-century spirit of moderation, the Festival was hardly an appropriate host to radical experiment. Moreover, as time went on the political situation conspired ever more against new aesthetic currents. And finally, Salzburg very early on courted the favor of a paying public which, overwhelmingly middlebrow, had a profound impact upon the character of the enterprise.

Postwar Salzburg has long been in a financial position to rectify its earlier neglect of twentieth-century artistic trends—in particular in the area of music, where this neglect was most glaring. Owing to the state's commitment, in 1950, to underwrite the Festival's deficits, it has come under the sponsorship of governments obsessed with maintaining Austria's cultural prestige.

But not until recent years has the Salzburg Festival attempted to give a hearing to contemporary musical works. Efforts are now being made to recognize the orchestral and operatic works of the contemporary international avant-garde as well as to do justice to such previously ignored Austrian twentieth-century figures—by no means all of them avant-garde—as Schreker, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Zemlinsky, Wellesz, and Krenek.

The addition of contemporary repertory

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—especially brand-new works—to the Festival's program is a boon to the composers who are lucky enough to have their works performed. The advantages of an opera premiere in Salzburg, for example, are many. Among them are the enormous prestige of the Festival, the best-attended in the world; its hefty bankroll, which allows the most generous of production budgets; and the collaboration of one of the world's most famous orchestras, the Vienna Philharmonic.

But such blessings do not come unmixed. In fact, one could well pose the question of whether the Salzburg ambiance is appropriate for the launching of new works. Since the Festival offerings still emphasize Mozart, Strauss, and other standards of the repertory performed by big-name ensembles and superstars, contemporary events constitute only a very small portion of the offerings. Thus, new works are often eclipsed by more popular spectacles. Further, Salzburg has proved unable to appeal to a faithful contemporary music audience, however modest in size, which could lend enthusiastic support and draw attention to works easily overshadowed.

Indeed, the remarkable social and intellectual homogeneity of the Festival audience may be the most serious problem for contemporary performance at Salzburg. A peculiarly clubby atmosphere reigns every evening in the concert hall—and not only because tickets must be procured well in advance of performances. The Salzburg Festival, after all, is the gathering place of wealthy and titled Europeans who have a taste for glittery high culture. Predominantly German-speaking, this is a public which is loyal, discriminating, and sometimes contentious. It proudly displays its predilection for Strauss. It extravagantly admires the conductor Herbert von Karajan, Lord of the Festival, and pays homage to him in the forms of both enthusiastic applause and the world's priciest opera tickets. It is dressed, from the orchestra to the galleries, in black-tie and evening gown—at least when not in Austrian national costume.

All this hardly seemed the perfect place for the premiere, last summer, of a new opera uncompromisingly modernistic in spirit: Luciano Berio's *Un Re in ascolto (A King Listens)*. The audience—there was apparently a last-minute rush to dispose of tickets—attended it with a great deal more apprehension than excitement, and received it with that rising icy-warmth which tends to greet a work the public suspects might be worthy but does not like.

Referring to this reception, a German critic spoke of Berio as having "won over" a skeptical audience. This judgment strikes me as unrealistic, despite the evening's merits. No experienced operagoer could fail to respond to the excellence of this production. The breathtakingly clever sets of Günther Schneider-Siemssen, the fluid staging of Götz Friedrich, the assurance and virtuosity of the Vienna Philharmonic under Lorin Maazel's baton, the dramatic conviction of the cast (in particular of Theo Adam in the title role)—all were obvious indications that those who took part in the premiere had absolute faith in Berio's work. Nevertheless, the audience arrived looking bored, imbibed intermission refreshments looking bored, and left for after-theater supper looking just as bored.

True, Berio and the poet Italo Calvino had made things difficult for the audience. Rejecting the traditional notion of opera as a drama with a comprehensible story line, they constructed a text upon fragments of poetry and dialogue inspired by theater of the absurd. This libretto, the literary sources of which include an essay by Roland Barthes on the difference between hearing and listening, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and two works based on *The Tempest* (W. H. Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror" and an eighteenth-century libretto by Friedrich Gotter), does not tell a story. Rather, it constitutes one of several theatrical elements the interaction of which takes the place of drama. Berio, in fact, refuses to label his work an "opera"; instead he refers to it in the program notes by the oblique description "musical action."

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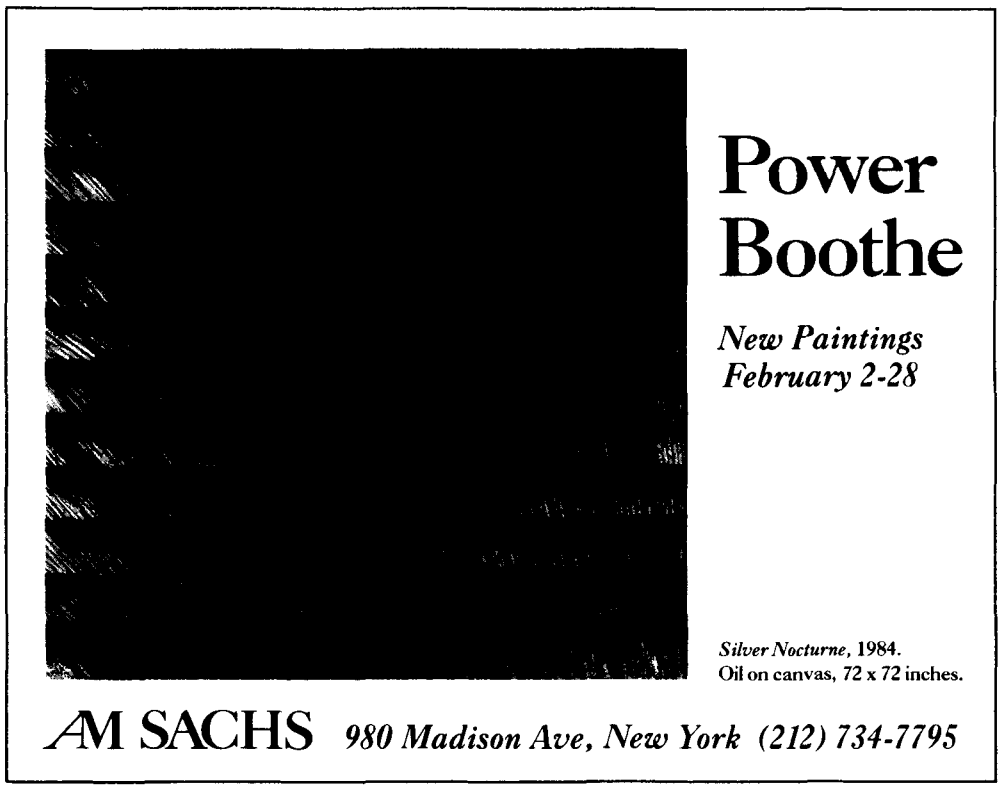

Here is just what the action consists of. A composer and producer, named for Shakespeare's Prospero, takes ill during a rehearsal of his musical adaptation of *The Tempest.* Things are not going well for the production. A soprano qualified to sing the leading aria is sought in vain. The director is incapable of realizing Prospero's ideas. Worse, Prospero himself is having trouble articulating his ideas. The feverish activity taking place around him touches him only vaguely, permeating his consciousness in the manner of a waking dream. He cannot concentrate on the rehearsal; instead, he is preoccupied with the search for a fleeting voice that he has heard in his sleep, a voice coming from a realm "on the other side of the tones" where he reigns as king over "a sea, . . . a flow" of music. This voice, it turns out, is the harbinger of his demise. Watching helplessly as Prospero is stricken with a heart attack, those around him—his colleagues, his lawyer, his doctor, even his wife—abandon him to his death. *"Addio,"* they sing, "mirror of tones, echo of deeds, fountain of time."

This is hardly an optimistic end to a work so obviously inspired by a Shakespearean comedy. For this reason alone Berio's Prospero begs for comparison with Shakespeare's. We know Shakespeare's Prospero as the consummate artist, an expert magician and clever manipulator, not only of everything and everybody that touches upon his island, but of the stage itself. Prospero's power to entrap others in his illusions, to blur their ability to distinguish reality from theater, extends even to the audience. At the beginning of *The Tempest,* Prospero deceives the audience into thinking that the storm on the stage is, within the context of the play, a natural one. And at the end he engages its suspension of disbelief beyond the limits of theater by refusing to indulge the Elizabethan convention of unmasking his character.

As adept as his sixteenth-century counterpart is at the art of creating and sustaining illusion, Berio's Prospero is clumsy. His efforts to produce a lifelike illusion out of the raw materials of his craft are failures. He

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barely manages to populate his stage with circus figures—acrobats, clowns, a juggler, a fire-eater, dancers, a tightrope walker. His actor declaims a text depicting the grotesque antics of cardboard characters—an old fool, an heroic lover. His fate is the fate of creative impotence; he dies, alone, on his own stage before his performance ever reaches the public.

Underlining the pathos of this twentieth-century Prospero's tragic end is the degeneration of his vital and malleable artistic vision into mere artificiality. The nearer his work comes to completion, the less lifelike spontaneity it has.

Prospero often speaks in despair of voices or tones that only he can hear, that are imprisoned in his imagination, and that he has no hope of reproducing for a public. The music that he does produce, when played back to him in his theater, returns to him as a mere echo, hardly related to his own voice. This echo seems to be the echo of an aesthetic tradition—a structured formalism that enslaves Prospero and prompts him repeatedly to reassure his audience, through the voice of his actor, that "in this magic night we shall shortly come to a plot."

Berio's concern with the relationship between spontaneity and formalism in art is, of course, not restricted to the confines of the dramatic situation. In the program notes the composer claims of his musical action that it "ends just before it becomes an opera," by which he probably means that *Un Re in ascolto* is essentially about its own evolution—from a concept to a finished artistic product.

But if Prospero wishes to be free—yet fails to achieve his desire—then Berio might have better served his libretto by shying away from formalism. Instead, the musical organization of *Un Re in ascolto* reveals how little Berio as a composer identifies with his main character's intent. In setting the libretto to music Berio chose a tightly controlled and unified structure. The structure is evident in the formal division of the work into musical sections—short movements which he entitles *aria, concertato, duetto,* and *audizione*—and in a clarity and consistency of character and mood delineation that is seldom encountered in contemporary opera.

Berio achieves this striking differentiation by deriving his musical material from a variety of stylistic sources, from classicism to late romanticism, and finally, minimalism. Each element of this quasi-neoclassical patchwork of styles is marked by its own particular motivic characteristics and woven into a transparent orchestral texture easily assimilated by the ear.

From minimalism, for example, come Prospero's arias, which have a static, chant-like quality. The predominance of the unresolved, dissonant tritone interval—drawn from late romantic and early modern music—in their sinuous melodies effectively suggests the hero's suffering, while the constant repetition of the note around which the melodies center provides an orientation point for the traditionally minded listener. Berio skillfully carries this florid melodic technique over into the arias sung by the "auditioning" sopranos, thus establishing an intimate connection between these haunting songs and Prospero's inner voice.

The composer's use of harmonic motives in sharply marked rhythms and in slow-moving chord progressions provides important unifying material for his work. These harmonic elements are the stationary foundation from which more flexible and fanciful musical elements (cadenza-like orchestral interludes, contrapuntal ornamentation, a suddenly intruding waltz theme) take flight. They are "atonal" in the sense that they are chords built upon dissonant intervalic relationships rather than on the consonant triads of classical harmony; yet through repetition they become easily recognizable.

But it is by repeating whole sections that Berio gives the work its clearest and most immediate unity and comprehensibility. Most effective, for example, is the repetition of the solemn choral theme from the first act at the end of the second. In the first act this neoclassical march gives warning of a coming storm. In the second, it is a farewell to the dying Prospero.

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As is the case with most highly touted opera productions these days, *Un Re in ascolto* has visually more to offer in its Salzburg production than do most established works of the genre. Schneider-Siemssen and Friedrich have created out of Prospero's theater a shimmering fantasy world reminiscent of the films of Fellini. Extravagant in its artificiality, it is meticulously choreographed, featuring acrobatics performed on a rising stage.

High praise has been accorded to the unusual and imaginative staging and much critical attention paid to the dramatic elements of the work, but the music—traditionally the meat of opera—has occasioned little comment. Here the music lover—or the opera lover—is, as always, in something of a dilemma. It would be idle to say that Berio isn't a Puccini, or a Richard Strauss, or even a Benjamin Britten. Whether or not it is in his talent to be like these accepted masters, it is certainly not his desire to follow in their footsteps. Instead he has chosen to write a new-sounding music, tempered only by an evident intention to provide something recognizable for a traditionally eared audience to hold onto. It is arguable that his intentions, and in this case their realization, have won him the right to be heard in something more than the pious silence with which *Un Re in ascolto* was received. A better outcome would certainly have been fair to Berio; it might have been in the best interests of a sophisticated audience perhaps now beginning to tire of familiar pleasures. Perhaps it could all be put another way: Is the Salzburg Festival, and its audience, really immutable?

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Theater

Stalemate in Cambridge

by Mimi Kramer

Why must the show go on?
—Noël Coward

The elevator at the Sheraton Commander Hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts seemed to be in some distress. It made a whirring, grinding noise when you pushed the button, like something threatening to take off: a low-pitched, driving beat that pulsed beneath an indeterminate hum.

The elevator wasn't the only one in distress. Spending a lonely evening in a strange hotel in Boston for the purpose of attending a production of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* was not my idea of a Saturday night out on the town. Still, it was an interesting controversy that had taken me there. Beckett's American publisher and theatrical agent had tried, on behalf of the playwright, to put a stop to the American Repertory Theater's production of *Endgame* on the grounds that it was inconsistent with the playwright's intentions as expressed in the published text of the play. Far away in Paris Beckett himself, alerted to certain aspects of the production, had gone to the lengths of refusing permission for the production to proceed; and his representatives in this country had threatened the company with litigation if it did.

What Beckett and his spokesmen chiefly objected to, apparently, were certain deviations from the playwright's requirements regarding set design. The production notes in the published script were clear. They called for:

> Bare interior.
> Grey light.
> Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture. Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins. Center, in an armchair on casters, covered with an old sheet, Hamm. Motionless by the door, his eyes fixed on Hamm, Clov. Very red face.
> Brief Tableau.

But the A.R.T. production, directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, was set in an abandoned subway station and included an overture and "incidental music" by the composer Philip Glass.

The controversy raised one or two interesting questions. Does a living playwright have the right to control the form in which his own work appears? On an artistic level (rather than a moral one), could a playwright be wrong about his own work? "Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me," Beckett had written. "My play requires an empty room and two small windows." Grove Press, moreover, had issued a statement arguing that "A living author of Beckett's stature should have the right to protect himself from what he perceives to be a gross distortion of his work."

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The A.R.T.'s answer to this, voiced to the press by Robert Brustein, artistic director of the theater, had been to point out that objections to the production were based entirely on "hearsay" and to suggest that "if any representatives of the Beckett interests" were to see the play they would "not only see that we have been true to it but that we have brought new values to an extraordinary play." Actually, representatives of the Beckett interests had in fact gone to see the production, which had resulted in their intention to seek a restraining order in federal court if necessary. This contingency was forestalled when an out-of-court settlement was reached requiring the theater to publish Beckett's statements in the program.

But what if Beckett had himself attended the production prior to denouncing it? What if the case had come to court? Would it have been possible for Beckett to be wrong about his own play? Would the A.R.T. and JoAnne Akalaitis have had to admit to an artistic blooper? Or would they have simply called Roland Barthes in from beyond the grave as an expert witness to testify against Samuel Beckett on the grounds that there is no such thing as a so-called "living" author, that it is language not the author which speaks, that real writers do not write *something* but *write,* and (in short) that the whole controversy was absurd because *intentionality* is an ideology expressed by bourgeois intellectuals seeking to impose a limit on the text?

It was with a view to pondering such questions that I had been sent up to Boston. On this issue few people seemed to be as confused as I was. "What a jerk!" most people had said on hearing of the controversy—meaning Beckett for making such a fuss. (A couple of them were even ruder.) "Gee," one young man had said laconically. "I didn't know Beckett was that interested in anything!" One or two people suggested that I take this opportunity to "blow the whistle" on Samuel Beckett. For one reason or another, everyone seemed instinctively to side with Brustein—or at any rate against Beckett.

In the day or two before my little jaunt north I asked a number of people generally what they thought of Beckett and formed the impression that the educated man in the street, as it were, respected Beckett and accepted the conventional wisdom that sees him as a great playwright, but wouldn't risk falling under a bus to see one of his plays; that the educated man in the street might well attend a production of, say, *Endgame* or *Waiting for Godot,* but wouldn't really look forward to it very much and might even wish, in the event, that he had brought along something to read.

Mind you, I know people who feel that way about *King Lear,* so on the plane up to Boston I tried to sort out my own position on Beckett. What worried me was that I didn't seem to have one. I knew I could get into quite a lather on behalf of a number of dead and living playwrights whose work I felt was being misrepresented or distorted, but I wasn't sure I could get worked up over Beckett. I do not love the plays of Samuel Beckett. I do not have lines from them going round in my head the way my head is sometimes full of lines from Tom Stoppard or even David Mamet. Beckett's plays rarely move me. On the other hand, they don't offend me either. I don't think Beckett is a charlatan or someone on whom there is a "whistle" to be blown. Was I, I began to wonder, too detached to be able to judge this production of *Endgame* fairly?

Exactly how detached was I? Could I, for instance, live without Beckett? Literally: did I think the world could be without the plays of Samuel Beckett and feel no sorrow? I tried imagining a world in which *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* had never been written and felt suddenly depressed. How awful, I thought. Without Beckett there wouldn't have been any Stoppard, or any Mamet for that matter. Stoppard's pair of anonymous, accommodating bumblers in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* were direct descendants of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*; similarly, the three pairs of anonymous businessmen whose three conversations make up the first act of David

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Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*—and about whom we know almost nothing except how they talk and which one has the upper hand—owe their existence similarly to *Endgame,* in which practically all we know or need to know of Hamm and Clov and their post-apocalypse world is that one is master and the other slave. Still, all this went merely to prove that Beckett was an influential writer. And influence doesn't make for Show Business: you cannot put it onstage.

I had brought a number of things along with me to read on the plane, among them *Endgame* (of course), *Godot,* and a set of notes from the off-Broadway production of *Endgame* I'd seen in New York last year. I turned now to *Waiting for Godot* remembering having been impressed by it in school and wondering what I would think of the play now. The copy I had brought was one that had lain about my family's house for years and bore what seemed to be three separate sets of markings, the clearest, written in a neat but nondescript hand, being a series of notes that one of us had made in the margins. They were oblique and literary critical, comments like, "Even in the Godot world without definitions of time and space there is irrational hostility" and "Contrition and Expiation: human relations existing in a void"—but whether they were someone's thoughts, or the words of someone's teacher or professor jotted down in class, or even notes meticulously copied out of a book of criticism I could not have said. At the bottom of page eleven someone had written, "The dream Gogo never tells—*Six Characters*: the motivation the Father never explains." I wondered what that meant.

The other two sets of markings were more immediately recognizable to me. On some of the pages written in now-fading pencil and by a younger more erratic hand, were blocks of letters and numbers: cues from a school production I had run lights for years ago. Finally, a series of red-ink underlinings told me exactly which lines or gestures in *Waiting for Godot* had seemed memorable or meaningful to me, at age fourteen or fifteen.

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Glancing through them I was alternately embarrassed and amused. Some of them were really terrible: "You'd make me laugh if it wasn't prohibited." At fifteen I'd thought that was deep! Some of the lines were nice, if a little fatuous: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops." Some of the exchanges were such that, if delivered lightly or underplayed, they might have been exquisite, but one could so easily imagine them badly performed:

Estragon: *(Coldly)* There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us to part.
Vladimir: You wouldn't go far.
Estragon: That would be too bad, really too bad. *(Pause.)* Wouldn't it, Didi, be really too bad? *(Pause.)* When you think of the beauty of the way. *(Pause.)* And the goodness of the wayfarers . . . .

And sometimes it was astonishing how swiftly Beckett could plummet from comic brilliance to banal solemnity, as at the end of Act I, when Estragon decides to abandon his boots:

Estragon: *(turning to look at the boots).* I'm leaving them there. *(Pause.)* Another will come, just as . . . as . . . as me, but with smaller feet, and they'll make him happy.
Vladimir: But you can't go barefoot!
Estragon: Christ did.
Vladimir: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!
Estragon: All my life I've compared myself to him.
Vladimir: But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!
Estragon: Yes. And they crucified quick.

Pity about that last line, I thought, so heavy-handed. Still, as I reread, taking stock of all the annotations all of us had

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made, what struck me chiefly was the degree to which Beckett's verbiage and material seem familiar or routine to us because of echoes that came after him. That and the discovery that *Waiting for Godot* is actually a very funny play—funny "ha-ha," that is, not funny "strange" or "obscure." What impressed me now about *Godot* was not its serious but its comic content, not the vision it posited of existential voids but its wealth of really funny jokes.

Which shouldn't really have surprised me, now that I came to think about it; for that was pretty much what last year's off-Broadway revival of *Endgame* had suggested about Beckett: that he was generally a good deal funnier than we remembered and that it required a light, delicate touch to carry off much in his plays that had become the standard bromides for adolescent malaise. There were lines in *Endgame* like, ". . . you're on earth, there's no cure for that!" And (of God): "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" Still, if such utterances seemed sophomoric or trite, that was partly due to Beckett. There were exchanges—nay, whole sequences—that were embarrassingly bad, almost unperformable, like that bit about bicycles at the beginning:

Hamm: Go and get two bicycle wheels.
Clov: There are no more bicycle wheels.
Hamm: What have you done with your bicycle?
Clov: I never had a bicycle.
Hamm: The thing is impossible.
Clov: When there were still bicycles I wept to have one. I crawled at your feet. You told me to go to hell. Now there are none.

This sort of stuff approached self-parody!

Then there were lines that sounded lovely but seemed to mean very little on reflection, like Hamm's late pronouncement: "You weep, and weep for nothing, so as not to laugh, and little by little . . . you begin to grieve." But there were also things in *Endgame*—an image, a relationship—that had become a permanent part of the mental luggage one carried around: the image of putting one's old parents in rubbish bins, for instance, and putting the lid down on them. ("Have you bottled her?" asks Hamm. "Are they both bottled?") Or the alternately sad and funny exchange between Hamm and Clov that comes early on and draws us in and leaves us wondering who they are or what they were to each other before whatever happened happened.

Hamm: . . . Why do you stay with me?
Clov: Why do you keep me?
Hamm: There's no one else.
Clov: There's nowhere else.
(Pause.)
Hamm: You're leaving me all the same.
Clov: I'm trying.
Hamm: You don't love me.
Clov: No.
Hamm: You loved me once.
Clov: Once!
Hamm: I've made you suffer too much. *(Pause.)* Haven't I?
Clov: It's not that.
Hamm *(shocked)*: I haven't made you suffer too much?
Clov: Yes!
Hamm *(relieved)*: Ah you gave me a fright!

That was one of the nice things about Beckett, I mused: he really did have a sense of humor. And finally, there was Hamm's narrative, the story he is trying to finish when the play begins. We never hear the beginning or the end of it, but there comes a moment toward the end of the play, when the man he talks of having met in that far-off time just after whatever happened happened begins to sound as though he must have been Clov's father and when the child he was asked to feed and shelter and take into his service begins to sound like Clov himself.

I thought back to that off-Broadway production of *Endgame* I had seen last year. Staged at the newly christened Samuel Beckett Theater on Forty-second Street and directed by Alvin Epstein; there if anywhere had been an instance of Beckett faithfully and reverently rendered. Alvin Epstein, after all, had acted in both the original New York

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production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1956 and the 1958 production of *Endgame* that Alan Schneider had directed. The 1984 revival in the little off-Broadway house on "Theater Row" had actually been dedicated to Schneider, for he had died only a few days before; and the program had sported a big picture of the famous Beckettian director wearing a turtleneck shirt and one of those Greek fisherman's caps.

There had been nothing in Epstein's production of *Endgame* that either Beckett or his literary representatives could have found fault with on paper: no weird music, no visual allusions to the Metropolitan Transit Authority. Every prop and every set direction had been in place, as well as every yawn, every *"Brief laugh"* and every *"(Pause)."* A production committed to being true to the spirit of the play. But Epstein's *Endgame* had not really been true to the spirit of the play. Too often it had been sententious where it should have been funny; and with every line delivered something in the actor's bearing, some aura of solemnity and self-importance, had carried the message: "We are serious actors doing something very, very difficult. This is art theater you are seeing!" The house manager, at the beginning of the evening, had even come forward and respectfully requested that people turn off the alarms on their digital watches. The implication was that nothing could be allowed to disturb either audience or performers during this important artistic event. I'd half expected someone in the audience to call out, "Aw, lighten up, Mac!" But instead the audience had applauded.

The seat-belt light went on: we had begun our descent into Logan Airport and as I craned my neck to see out of the window I was suddenly visited by one of those crazy thoughts that sometimes come to one at very high altitudes. Whatever was wrong with Samuel Beckett had less to do with Beckett himself than with the nature of his champions and followers—or those among them who, whether in academia or the theater, insisted on his primacy as an obscure playwright of high seriousness in order to reaffirm the importance of their own contributions toward the problem of elucidating his work. It was telling that of the four or five books of criticism I had browsed through in the last few days and brought up with me, the best were not those written by Beckett "specialists," people who had devoted their lives and careers to solving the enigma of Samuel Beckett, but those who—like Hugh Kenner, A. Alvarez, and J. L. Styan—were willing and able to place Beckett in the context of literary or dramatic history. The real mountebank was not the playwright but the academic critic or director who tried to make book out of the myth of Beckett's obscurity.

I had gone straight to the hotel from the airport. On the way to the theater, an hour or two later, I tried to locate where, if anywhere, my musings on the plane had left me. Might there, I wondered, be something rather important about the humorous content in Beckett? Could the informing aspect of *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* be a reaffirmation rather than the somewhat glandular *désespoir* for which these plays were known? It was, after all, in being funny that Beckett was at his best and it was chiefly by making us laugh that he managed to endear his characters to us. Should Beckett's audience properly leave the theater feeling uplifted because the playwright had managed to make us care about these fellows who were no one, did little, and learned nothing?

Whatever may be the truth about Samuel Beckett and where his greatness lies, I was not fated to find out that evening.

If last year's New York revival of *Endgame* was sententious where it should have been funny, its counterpart in Boston could be said to err in the opposite direction: for though JoAnne Akalaitis's production strives desperately to be sententious, it succeeds in being merely laughable. Her directorial insights consist of having assembled a cast of rather more-than-usually untalented and unaccomplished actors and having superimposed on Beckett's play a number of gratuitous "experimental" theater tricks. That

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poignant early exchange between Hamm and Clov, for instance, is delivered in a robot-like monotone at machine-gun speed: two computers from *2001: A Space Odyssey* having a tête-à-tête. The lines are even less intelligible than the artistic motivation. At another point, the actors onstage leave off talking altogether and begin moving unaccountably in slow motion while a badly taped recording of the dialogue (complete with lip-smacking and respiratory noises) picks up the script in overvoice. It is an index of Akalaitis's capabilities as a theater director, I think, that she has to resort to cinematic tricks in presenting her "interpretation" of a play. But such tricks are not interpretation or elucidation of a text: they are like the courtesan's cheap scent and powder, the dressings and accoutrements of an aging avant-garde fitfully trying to convince itself that it has not lost its attraction to the guys who foot the bills.

JoAnne Akalaitis's production of *Endgame* suggests that she understands not the first thing about Beckett, theater, or how to keep an audience from thinking about what's in the refrigerator at home. From the moment Ben Halley, Jr., opens his mouth declaiming, "Me . . . to . . . play . . ." in ascending fifths, the whole production stinks of ghastly avant-garde pretentions. It was, in fact, exactly what Beckett had predicted it would be: a "parody" of his play. The sad thing was that five minutes into the play you understood how he had known.

Beckett's objection to the Philip Glass music had had nothing to do with the composer himself—not in any of the published statements he'd made, anyway. Rather, he had simply objected to *Endgame* or any of his plays being performed with music. In this case the "overture" was already playing when you entered the theater: piped-in music, two instruments—some sort of drum (a bongo?) and a cello or bass being played not unlike a sitar. It wasn't particularly strange music; in fact it sounded a little familiar: no tune and lots of bass line. I tried to think where I'd heard something like it before. What did it remind me of? A subway, of course, that was the obvious intention; but there was something else. A restaurant scene in a movie set in Singapore? No, it was more industrial, more motorized than that. I decided it had to be some noise associated with the airplane ride.

The point was, though, that however strange the music was trying to be it could not possibly be strange enough in the context. For a Beckett play is already pretty strange to begin with. What Beckett had known without having to see this production was that any music written specifically for one of his plays was bound to be redundant. Like the set. There were various technical and specific ways in which the set interfered with the text of the play—it hid a good deal of important action and rendered a number of lines either meaningless or unfunny. But the underlying inappropriateness of the idea was that it literalized everything in the play that was meant to be figurative or ambiguous, thereby rendering the play facile rather than universal. Take the issue of Clov's parentage, for instance. One of the driving forces carrying the play along (particularly in the absence of any conventional plot) is our desire to find out who Clov is and what he is doing there chained to this man he hates, serving him beyond even the ending of the world. What, we wonder, is meant to be the nature of the bond between these two: is it blood? Duty? Some sort of debt? A sense of obligation? Or just the threat of loneliness and oblivion? Sometimes Hamm talks in a way that almost makes us think he is Clov's father—so that it comes as a surprise when, in the middle of that boring and digressive-sounding story Hamm keeps coming back to, we suddenly realize that he may be telling us the answer we most want to hear.

In JoAnne Akalaitis's production of *Endgame* two of the four actors were black: Hamm and his father Nagg. But since the other two actors, playing Clov and Nell (Hamm's mother, if you're following me) were not black, the focus of the play's concerns seemed to have shifted somewhat. It seemed scarcely possible that Clov could be

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Hamm's son: Hamm's story, therefore, became rather shatteringly boring, being a complete and pointless digression. And during some of its more deadly moments, one found one's mind wandering off onto the question of how Hamm, with a white mother, had turned out so much darker than his father.

Gone was the element of mystery and ambiguity. Gone, too, was the element of "whatever happened." You knew damn well what was supposed to have happened with the lower half of that fallout-shelter sign staring you in the face from behind the archway—notwithstanding the fact that the burnt-out shell of a subway car which dominated the stage looked more electrocuted than nuked.

To go by what I saw at the A.R.T. that night, Boston audiences must be the politest in the world. The amount of squirming in the audience suggested that they were bored beyond endurance: never have I seen so fidgety an audience. At one point some poor woman's seat squeaked, several rows ahead of me, rather loudly. The entire right section of the audience turned and looked at her: a long, searching stare. I peered at some of the faces, trying to come to grips with their apparent indignation. Were they so involved in the play? But it was not annoyance but interest and curiosity that I read on every face: that squeaky seat was the most interesting thing that had happened in the theater all evening.

Yet they stayed. No one walked out and I was the first one to leave the auditorium. In the outer lobby I encountered a young couple against whom I seemed to be racing for the door. He was saying to her, "What can I say? A terrible production of a terrible play!" She nodded feelingly. For a moment I had it in mind to object, to suggest that they really couldn't judge Beckett on the basis of what they had seen of Robert Brustein and JoAnne Akalaitis. Instead, I plunged through the door and out into the snow. There was a sense in which he was right.

The A.R.T. production did not do justice

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to *Endgame* by any means. But it did suggest a rather fundamental weakness in the play. The production had been, as Beckett said, a "parody" of Beckett. But a parody of Beckett is something it should not have been so easy to produce. A bad production of a good play can be a *travesty*; but in order to present a parody of a dramatic work, it ought to be necessary to change the words. Take *King Lear,* for example, the play to which *Endgame* is most often likened: it would be possible to stage a production of *Lear* that was very, very bad but not, I think, one that was a parody of itself. *Lear* dramatizes certain abstractions ("We come hither weeping . . ."; "O I have t'en too little care of these . . ."; the idea of service) and *Endgame* seems to echo some of these themes ("He's crying." "Then he's living"; "All those I might have helped!" "Why do you stay with me?" "Why do you keep me?"). But in *Endgame* the abstractions are only half-realized dramatically. The real trouble with the A.R.T. production of *Endgame* was that it robbed Beckett of his obliquity and showed us—albeit without meaning to—how little there was that was left.

Next morning at the hotel, I did some deliberating as I went through my few preparations for leaving Boston. Given that the production had been as dreadful as it was, who was right? Beckett or Brustein? Should the playwright have interfered? Should the director have stood up for his theater? The answer was actually quite simple and the quality of the production had nothing to do with it. Beckett had every right to object to Brustein's production: it was his duty and privilege both—on hearing what they were doing to his play—to call *The Boston Globe, The New York Times,* and anyone he thought would publish his statements. But beyond voicing his own judgment and opinions a living playwright's jurisdiction could morally go no further in a healthy society. The show—in answer to Noël Coward's question—had to go on, no matter how terrible it was. For all sorts of reasons: because playwrights *can* be wrong about their own work (a playwright is wrong about his own work every time he writes a bad line he thinks is good!), because it is the proper task of the director to present his interpretation of a play as he sees fit (whether it is good or bad), and because the amount of damage that a bad production can do to a play ought not to be so great that it justifies so drastic a curtailment of artistic freedom.

Ought. As I put my pyjamas and my toothbrush in my briefcase and placed on top of them the rather huge selection of reading materials I had brought along for an overnight excursion, I thought about that "ought." The defense of Robert Brustein's freedom of expression depended rather heavily on the assumption that there was someone else, other than the playwright, to defend a dramatist's work and to deliver a verdict on whether or not it had been well or faithfully presented: the critic. And that, in turn, required that there should be a "free" critical forum in which the quantity and quality of attention that a production got was likely to match the quality and quantity of attention it deserved. At this point in my thinking I realized that the A.R.T. production of *Endgame* would not prove to have taken place in such an environment.

Sitting on top of the books in my briefcase was a stack of magazines called *American Theatre* put out by an organization known as the Theatre Communications Group. I had brought the magazines along because I wanted to read up on JoAnne Akalaitis and her theater collective Mabou Mines and *American Theatre* has, in the ten months since its launching, devoted an extraordinary amount of space and attention to JoAnne Akalaitis and Mabou Mines. The Theatre Communications Group is an organization whose worthy mission is to further the cause of non-profit theater in the United States and, as such, they have an interest in promoting non-profit theater. All non-profit theater, whether it is good or bad. Until April of 1984 Theatre Communications Group put out a newsletter called *Theatre-Communications.* It looked like a newsletter and read like a newsletter. Its purpose was to

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publish information about the activities and finances of the non-profit theater world in order to make it easier for various theater groups to raise money for themselves. *American Theatre,* which replaced *TheatreCommunications,* does not look like a newsletter. It looks like a magazine and proclaims itself on the cover to be a "Monthly Forum for News, Features & Opinion." Its purpose, however, is still the same as that of the old publication: accordingly, I have never read in it any opinion that did not assume that any theater is good theater.

The trouble with a magazine like *American Theatre,* of course, is that it diminishes the likelihood that certain kinds of theater will receive the attention they deserve. Just as Mel Gussow, writing in *The New York Times* is distorting the facts when he refers to JoAnne Akalaitis's reputation as "a theater artist of intelligence and integrity" (for what is probably more responsible for that reputation than anything is surely the fact that Gussow himself writes a negative review only about once a year), so *American Theatre* relies on the same pattern of creating a reputation so as to be able to allude to it. In the context of Mel Gussow and *American Theatre*—the critical mafia that raises every breath taken onstage to an artistic event—it was easy to understand why Beckett would not want to leave his defense to the critics. The A.R.T. production would probably go down in history as a brilliant theatrical achievement.

I closed my briefcase and looked around the room to see if I'd forgotten anything. It had been a nice enough little room. I went out into the corridor and rang for the elevator. It wasn't until the elevator began hurtling toward me to take me away from Cambridge, the Sheraton Commander, and the A.R.T. that I realized what Philip Glass's overture had reminded me of.

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Dance

An American *Giselle*

by Eva Resnikova

In the years leading up to the flowering of the Romantic ballet in Paris, exotic locales were much in vogue. Long a staple of the melodramas that were the standard fare of the popular, or boulevard, theaters, exoticism finally infiltrated even the official stage of the Opéra, which heretofore had been trod almost exclusively by ancient Greek and Roman gods and heroes. In 1806 two ballets based upon Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's enormously popular novel *Paul et Virginie,* set among the sugar-cane plantations of the Île-de-France, had their premieres within days of each other: *Les Deux Créoles* at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin and *Paul et Virginie* at the Opéra. Both took advantage of the setting to include a "pas nègre."

Now contemporary Americans have a Creole ballet of their own: a restaging by Dance Theatre of Harlem of that touchstone of the Romantic ballet, *Giselle,* relocated from medieval Germany to nineteenth-century Louisiana, which was given its U.S. premiere during the company's fall season at City Center. DTH co-director Arthur Mitchell had long wanted to present *Giselle* as his company's first full-length nineteenth-century ballet classic, but he felt that his dancers could not "relate" to the characters and setting of the original. On a visit to Louisiana he had been struck by the romantic atmosphere of the bayous and felt that it would serve admirably as a new setting for his company's *Giselle.* Furthermore, research carried out by Mitchell and the production's designer, Carl Michel, provided evidence of a caste-ridden society of free blacks in the region prior to the Civil War, which would accommodate the story line.

Only a few minor adjustments in staging were required to adapt the story to its new setting; and in this respect, Mitchell's conceit can be said to have worked. But the reasoning behind it seems specious. After all, the bourgeois, cosmopolitan Parisians who first performed the ballet in 1841 did not feel any kinship with the medieval German peasants and aristocrats they were portraying. Nor do contemporary American dancers. The setting and period of *Giselle* were, in fact, intended to be "exotic"—that is, outside the experience of its performers and audience. Moreover, it is unlikely that the DTH dancers "relate" to the Creole setting and characters any more than they would to the original. Like all dancers who have submitted themselves to the rigors of the classical ballet, they have become part of a centuries-old tradition and have more in common with Grisi, Perrot, and their other predecessors in the roles than they do with the Louisiana farm folk they portray in this new production.

What separates today's dancers essaying *Giselle* from the dancers of 1841 is not race or nationality but the fact that the Parisians were performing in contemporary style, whereas today's dancers must consciously re-create a historical style. Re-creating Ro-

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mantic style is the thorniest issue in any modern production of *Giselle*. We cannot know for sure how the dancers of that time moved; we cannot know for sure even the exact steps they performed. All productions of ballets from other eras following the original are really only impressions of impressions; it is the task of the person staging the work to determine which impressions seem most valid. While no one presenting a Romantic-era ballet today seeks absolute historical authenticity—no audience would want to see such a production, with its tentative toe work and dancers flown on wires—we do want the sense that we are seeing a genuine attempt at re-creating the intent of the original.

In the case of *Giselle* the situation is further complicated by the fact that all modern productions derive not from the original 1841 Paris version but from Marius Petipa's 1884 St. Petersburg restaging. This was the version notated by Nicholas Sergeyev, régisseur at the Maryinsky, who left Russia after the Revolution and in the Thirties staged the ballet for several companies in the West, including the Markova-Dolin Ballet, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, and the Vic-Wells (later Royal) Ballet.

It is this version—once the reigning standard but no longer part of the current repertory—that Dance Theatre of Harlem has chosen to present. To stage it Mitchell turned to Frederic Franklin, a veteran of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, who taught and coached the DTH dancers, according to a recent interview, "exactly as I learned it from Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin." For, as Erik Bruhn points out in his essay "Restaging the Classics,"[1] just as Sergeyev's staging became the standard on which all Western productions of *Giselle* were based, the image of the British-born, Russian-trained ballerina Alicia Markova, modeled after nineteenth-century lithographs (Edwin Denby once wrote of her "touching Victorianisms"), became the prototype on which her successors based their interpretations.

We cannot know how closely Petipa's version was to the original choreography of Coralli and Perrot; but we do know that Petipa had himself participated in the Romantic ballet as a young dancer, and it seems safe to assume that he would have maintained the essential intent of the original. We may, in fact, imagine Petipa's restaging of Giselle to have been in the same spirit as Balanchine's restagings of Petipa and Ivanov: the homage of one master to another, bringing the work up to the technical level and different bodies of new dancers (for Petipa, this meant especially taking advantage of the advance in pointe work made possible by the blocked toe shoe) and adjusting it to the eyes and expectations of new audiences.

But it takes a master to pay homage to a master. Most restagings of nineteenth-century story ballets produced today are not by master choreographers or even ballet masters but by so-called artistic directors, or by star dancers—who are sometimes the same person. Too often the result is the mere arbitrary substitution of one person's idiosyncrasies for another's.

A prime example is Mikhail Baryshnikov's restaging of *Giselle* for American Ballet Theatre. Upon his accession to the artistic directorship in 1981, one of his first acts was to replace the ABT *Giselle* (originally staged after Sergeyev but modified in the late Sixties) with a production that more closely resembled the one that he remembered from Leningrad. A decade earlier, the defection of Natalia Makarova, who divided her time mostly between Ballet Theatre and the Royal Ballet, had provided the West with a new model for the role of Giselle. Because ABT and the Royal are the two leading repositories of the classics of the ballet repertory in the West, the result was the virtual replacement of the Russian-Anglo-American prototype of Markova-Sergeyev by the new Soviet prototype of Makarova-Baryshnikov.

The changes made by both dancers reflect a consistent point of view, most likely stemming from a reaction against the overly real-

1 In Charles Payne's *American Ballet Theatre* (Knopf, 1978).

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istic, officially approved version of *Giselle* that Soviet dancers were forced to adhere to beginning in the Thirties. (In 1935, in a rare Franco-Soviet cultural exchange, Marina Semyonova, who more than any other dancer typified the new Soviet style, danced the title role at the Paris Opéra with Serge Lifar and was criticized in the press for her "unbearable realism." She had, in fact, studied Stanislavskian methods at the Moscow Art Theater in preparation for dancing the role.) Makarova in her *Dance Autobiography*[2] complains that in the ABT production she encountered shortly after her defection, "unusual emphasis was given to the action." Later she recounts an epiphany in which she has a vision of the ballet as "a drama of the dualism of body and spirit, of their fatal incompatibility, which turns out to be the tragedy of love." Before, she had never been able to become "excited" by "this ordinary little melodrama." Now, she explains, "only one thing is important to me: both acts of *Giselle* are manifestations of her soul."

Baryshnikov has shown a similar disdain for *Giselle* as a danced drama. In his restaging of the ballet for ABT, the first act is dispensed with as quickly as possible; the role of Hilarion, Giselle's peasant suitor, is reduced almost to a cipher; and Myrtha, the Queen of the Wilis, who should control the dramatic action of the second act, is in effect demoted from ballerina to soloist. Baryshnikov has written that the "dramatic material" of the second act is "not rich in substance"[3]; and, indeed, he has given us a second act that is more of a pure-dance *ballet blanc* than the *ballet d'action*—or, more accurately, the melodrama—of Théophile Gautier's original scenario. For melodrama is precisely what *Giselle* was intended to be, not the star-ballerina-turn psychodrama of Makarova's imagining. It is as mistaken to deny the melodramatic essence of a Romantic-era ballet like *Giselle* as it is to deny the fairy-tale

2 Edited by Gennady Smakov (Knopf, 1979).

3 *Baryshnikov at Work,* edited by Charles France (Knopf, 1979).

February

Frank Stella

Had Gadya (after El Lissitsky)

A set of 12 handpainted prints completed in the artist's studio in late 1984

in the Small Print room:

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essence of a Classical-era ballet like *The Sleeping Beauty.*

Dance Theatre of Harlem has done audiences a real service by putting back into the current repertory a production of *Giselle* in the out-of-fashion Sergeyev-Markova tradition. At the same time, it has provided itself with an ideal vehicle to showcase the company's dramatic flair and stylistic cohesiveness. Its dancers have always been more adept at romantic-style ballet than at classical, whether it is the Jazz Age neo-romanticism of Nijinska's *Les Biches* or the neo-expressionism of Tetley's *Voluntaries,* for the simple reason that the classical style requires a level of technical virtuosity and precision that they have not yet attained. Possessing an easy legato that serves them well in romantic and expressionistic works, they seem to equate classicism with staccato, separating steps within phrases—in the Balanchine-Stravinsky *Agon,* which preceded *Giselle* on some programs, often in odd places, indicating that they did not really understand the choreography or the music.

Virginia Johnson was for the most part up to the technical demands of the title role in *Giselle* and had a sweet and touching manner. The dancing of the *corps de ballet* in both acts was exemplary—disciplined yet unforced. The second act, however, was marred by the absence in the company of a ballerina commanding both the skill in miming and the technique necessary to fulfill the demands of the pivotal role of Myrtha.

Apart from its own merits and faults, the DTH *Giselle* should serve as a reminder to American audiences of an important part of their dance heritage. It is undeniable that the Soviets, with their virtuosity and flamboyance, injected some much-needed vitality into ABT at a time when it was floundering, when the traditions upon which it had been founded seemed stale and superannuated. But at the same time, the increasing Sovietization of ballet in America has caused something valuable to be lost: an American balletic tradition that had for decades run parallel to and complemented Balanchinean classicism. Even his staunchest supporters will agree that we cannot live by Balanchine alone. We need the living presence of our history in the form of the nineteenth-century classics, and we especially need a living tradition of the romantic style to complement the classical tradition being carried on by New York City Ballet. If American Ballet Theatre cannot any longer perform a creditable *Les Sylphides*—one of its signature pieces—perhaps it, too, should try looking back to its own traditions rather than embracing alien ones.

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Art

The small-scale paintings of Cavallino

by Creighton Gilbert

It has been obligatory for some time now, in reviewing ambitious art exhibitions, to deplore the blockbuster. Now it seems almost as much a cliché to praise those exhibitions that tend the other way by giving us intimate displays of less famous works. A case where such praise is genuinely due is the recent exhibition of the Neapolitan painter Bernardo Cavallino (1616-1656) at the Cleveland Museum of Art.[1]

The Italian Baroque, which Cavallino exemplifies, is in fashion, especially among the buyers for museums. It is the usual story of an art that has long been overlooked or rejected as dull being revived—and then bought and sold at steeply rising prices. So perhaps it should not have seemed surprising that the symposium which the Cleveland Museum arranged to mark the Cavallino exhibition was attended by scholar-dealers from several countries and even some conservators. These are people who are part of the art-history world but who are rarely visible in the meetings designed to argue out problems of history. Scholar-dealers specialize in Old Master paintings and are as learned as many professors. Related to them are the self-employed scholars who work as consultants to dealers and collectors and who may assemble exhibitions rather like the one in Cleveland.

After decades of decline, the buying and selling of Old Master paintings in the United States has lately been on the rise. The first conspicuous sign of this was the appearance of the London auction houses on the New York scene. Recently Old Master dealers have started again to show their stock in public exhibitions instead of just seeing their clients by appointment. All this helps to pull unknown works by artists like Cavallino out of hiding and to make possible an exhibition like the one in Cleveland, the first for the artist.

The larger role of the Italian Baroque in the active art market is analogous to the fashion for Baroque music (the whole type, not just Bach and a few others), for postmodern architecture, and for nineteenth-century Academic painting, which has now moved from the realms of camp taste to become the object of plain admiration. A typical big Baroque machine, with a saint being martyred or amorous classical gods—bright in hue, complicated in patterns that evoke movement—presents in essence a formulaic language that borrows a lot from Rubens while modifying his active brushed surface and line with more polished and neat ones. Cavallino, though, is a distinc-

1 "Bernardo Cavallino of Naples, 1616-1656" was on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art from November 14 through December 30. It travels from there to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas (January 26-March 24) and the Museo Pignatelli Cortes in Naples (April 24-June 26). The coordinator of the exhibition was Ann Tzeutschler Lurie, curator of paintings at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

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tive exception in this context. Indeed, he is an isolated figure, and the discussants at the Cleveland symposium rightly worried a good deal over his emergence in his place and time. But when they took up the problem of finding links to Cavallino in his age, at least some of them showed the kind of unarticulated limitation that is typical of slide lectures. Pointing, often plausibly, to likenesses between Cavallino and a contemporary—a facial type here, a set of gestures there—they tended not to register the sorts of divergences that slides do not show: of surface handling, and especially of scale.

The lack of attention to scale in particular recalled the phenomenon common to art-history courses, where students ask about sizes and professors have rather fuzzy answers. Students can develop an impression that works of art are all about the same size—slide projection size—which leads to shocks when they see originals on their travels. By contrast, newspaper reviews of exhibitions of current paintings make scale a dominant matter; it's so easy for it to register.

Cavallino's earliest critics regularly noticed the importance of scale in his work. It re-emerged in Cleveland in the talk contributed to the symposium by one of the exhibition's organizers and went on to be emphasized in the discussion that followed. Typically about three-feet high and four-feet wide, Cavallino's favorite kind of painting is what a little after his time came to be called the "cabinet picture." This label reflects its destination in rich private houses, not churches or other grand public spaces. He did do some church paintings, and his contemporaries did small ones, but he is really unusual in making the small ones his main thrust. In this he seems to predict a future when paintings would come to find their usual resting places in apartments—all the better for dealers; thus Cavallino represents a modern turn so elementary it can pass unremarked. He also predicts an age only a bit later than his own in his figures, whose daintiness of type and movement, with thin brushstrokes pulled out in wisps, have often reminded people of the rococo porcelain figurines created in the following century.

But are small pictures all that special? They had been the chief vehicle, two hundred years before, of the early Flemish masters, starting with Jan van Eyck, who also worked for private houses; the main themes of these painters were portraits and Madonnas used in prayer. In Renaissance Venice, where we first see a widepread pattern of paintings made to be collected for aesthetic reasons, Giorgione's masterpiece *The Tempest* seems to foretell Cavallino, not just in its scale and destination or in the personal handling of paint, but in the almost novelistic interaction of the figures, to which we are meant to bring our psychological experience. Most of the works of Giorgione and other Italian painters up to Cavallino's time, however, are larger and more formal. It was in northern Europe that artists used small scale most of the time, only departing from it perhaps when magnetized by the impressiveness of Italian monumentality, Rubens being the most obvious case. So even if Cavallino was isolated in his own environment, in Naples, we might explain him by saying he felt two pulls, from northern small-scale painting—which in his age Italians were prepared to notice with respect—and from the market of private buyers, which was apparently growing.

Yet this fairly obvious reading has not satisfied historians, and I think they are right. Those stimuli do not seem to explain what we see here. But there is another anomaly present—almost unmentioned in the symposium and in other scholarship—having to do with subject matter. This was the period when artists in all countries showed a strong tendency to specialize in one or a few themes, becoming landscapists, portraitists, or the like. Since it was also the age of absolutism, art theory viewed these specialties in a ranking from the least to the most noble. Still lifes and scenes of everyday life were at the bottom, portraits and landscapes were

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better, but the top was "history painting." That was the composition of a group of figures in a dramatic tableau most often illustrating the Bible or classical literature. History painting was the main concern of the great Renaissance masters like Michelangelo and continued to be central to David and Delacroix, even (without the traditional literary referent) to Courbet and Manet. The criterion for ranking was the idea that to record the look of the world is less honored than to imagine a dramatic incident, the high moment of interaction among people—implying a statement about life—of the sort we now ask from novelists. But the ranking also had an instinctive correlation to scale. The great Renaissance history paintings, and the later ones of Rubens and David, were grand monuments, even if their painters turned out smaller variants too. By contrast a still life or portrait was small.

What separates Cavallino is that he not only finds himself most comfortable in the smaller range, as everyone has noticed, but also produces history paintings in it. He retains a Renaissance type of composition, choreographing the people with a balanced weighting on the two sides of the rectangular field of canvas, giving each his own sharply attuned pose and gesture to focus the confrontation of character. He also retains the traditional quantity of dramatis personae; hence the scale of each figure has to be small too, as it need not be in a small still life or landscape if the artist takes the simple option of reducing the complexity of elements. In Cavallino the impact of "small" on us is thus doubled. That is surely why smallness is part of his aesthetic impact on everybody, while it is not part of, say, that of Vermeer, whose contemporary paintings of daily life are smaller but contain a small cast of characters.

What is presumably behind Cavallino's formula is that in his age the dominant position of the "cabinet painting" for a house had become so complete that it was able to start swallowing history painting, the last holdout of larger paintings meant for public spaces. He is not himself the bold inventor of this phenomenon, however. It had begun perhaps a generation before with the travelling artists who went from northern European areas (where their training would have made them used to small scale as a good thing, not second-rate) to Italy, where classic history painting had its center. The marvelous Adam Elsheimer, who went from Germany to Venice just after 1600, may be seen to have taken the step, for instance, in his *Philemon and Baucis,* depicting a story out of the standard repertory of Latin poetry. This picture's scheme of balanced figures emerges from a dark environment and strikes me as actually more similar to early works of Cavallino than any of those by his fellow Neapolitans cited in the Cleveland symposium. (There is a natural tendency in this scholarship to be narrow in geographical range. Elsheimer's picture was copied in an engraving, so it might turn up anywhere.)

Cavallino's great model for this, though, is plainly Poussin, who immigrated from France to Rome about ten years before Cavallino appeared on the scene in Naples. Early writers on Cavallino rightly spotted that he worked "alla pussinesca." That perception is now overlaid, too much perhaps, by close inquiries into Cavallino's year-to-year chronology and by examinations of true and false attributions, the favored problems when an artist is being re-evaluated. Cavallino may be, nevertheless, the first native Italian to show this particular turn to the cabinet picture. Another way in which he differs from the foreigners who had preceded him might thus also be explicable. He was assisted by their trailblazing to make a slight shift in the tone of history painting from grand to intimate, but was also more at home with it than they. In Poussin and other pioneers history painting is typically as solemn in its ethical messages as it is strict in its angular structure. Cavallino, perhaps first, ties it to the deluxe aspect of private possession by making it soft and charming, graceful and dainty, seeming—as has been noticed—to predict the rococo. Losing sternness, it becomes middlebrow, and in this aspect it is

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not at all isolated from the rest of the now fashionable academic Baroque.

Yet Cavallino's pictures retain their ethical announcements. His subjects are mostly rather common for his period: Esther before Ahasuerus, David and Abigail, Erminia among the Shepherds (the last a standard incident from Tasso's epic *Jerusalem Delivered*). The obvious question is whether he chose the subjects and offered the pictures for sale or someone commissioned them. The latter seems likely in the fairly frequent cases where the pictures come in sets. One detects a patron with an ethos mildly urging the doing of the right thing when several pictures of the same size, taking stories from different texts, share the same moral point: "a king warned of imminent defeat in a battle," say, or "the evils of drink." (This ethos is not distant from the nearly contemporary fables of La Fontaine, likewise charming, small-scale revampings of classical moral teachings, almost into baubles.) We know nothing of Cavallino's buyers; we do know a lot about Poussin's, and it seems that they and the artist shared convictions. The patron was often drawn to the subject the artist had chosen because he felt the same way, just as readers today are drawn to novels that share their particular ideology. Evidently it seemed good to these officials and aristocrats to refer, in the decorations of their houses, to what before had been a public statement of belief, the implication being that now the private owner is the manager of those ideals for the society. Cavallino widens the range of this expression with a less strict assertion about responsibility—an almost commercial version that is cushioned, if not quite sugared.

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The Borofsky spectacle

by Eric Gibson

In the matter of engaging the attention of the viewer, the modern artist has gone his Renaissance counterpart one better. Where the Renaissance artist admitted the viewer into the picture by means of one-point perspective, the contemporary artist can, if he wishes to, include his viewer literally—in the form of an installation. With an installation the viewer does not enter a room and walk over to a work of art; rather, the room *is* the work of art, and he is part of it. The point of an installation is to transform a room into an active, charged art environment embracing all those who enter it.

Jonathan Borofsky, whose retrospective came to the Whitney Museum this winter, is an artist who has worked almost exclusively with installations.[1] The scale and place of this exhibition—it occupies the Whitney's entire fourth floor—is important. It is one thing to see an installation in a downtown gallery, where the innate informality of the form matches the transience of gallery scheduling and the general bohemian tone of the neighborhood.[2] It is quite another to see an installation in an uptown museum. To his credit, Borofsky is able to cope with his new surroundings (almost too well: this is the nearest thing to a carnival the Whitney has achieved since its 1975 di Suvero retrospective), but the capacious museum space also draws attention to problems in his work that are not so easily overcome.

Borofsky began his installations in the Seventies as a means of preserving, for the viewer, both the directness and randomness of his artistic thought. He had finished graduate school in the mid-Sixties, when Minimalism and Conceptualism dominated a large part of the art scene. Partly in response to the tenets of Conceptualism, he temporarily retreated from making art of any kind. Instead, he devoted his energies to thinking about art and noting down his observations. Gradually he began making

1 "Jonathan Borofsky" was organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art. The exhibition, which began at the Philadelphia Museum (October 7-December 2, 1984), will be on view at the Whitney until March 10. From there it travels to the University Art Museum, Berkeley (April 17-June 16), the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (September 13-November 3), and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (December 14, 1985-February 9, 1986). The exhibition's catalogue, *Jonathan Borofsky,* was written by Mark Rosenthal and Richard Marshall and published by the Philadelphia and Whitney museums: 202 pages, $40 ($18.95, paperback).

2 Since installations developed, in part, as a means of short-circuiting the commodity status of a work of art, there is some irony in their appearing in commercial galleries at all. There is further irony—if that is the word—to be found in the fact that Borofsky, who subscribes to this anti-commodity point of view, benefits from the salable objects that result from these installations.

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sketches as well as counting continuously from one, accumulating stacks of paper covered with neat columns of figures. This process constitutes the hub of Borofsky's installations to this day, for the counting goes on; he assigns to a completed painting or drawing the next number in the sequence, in place of a signature.

From the very first Borofsky's installations were self-referential—indeed, autobiographical. In his hands the subjectivism that was emerging in the Seventies—in reaction to the cold, cerebral approach of Minimalism and Conceptualism—was taken to new and idiosyncratic extremes. In his work one could find notes to himself, messages scribbled on drawings and drawings scribbled on message pads (often expressing Borofsky's social and political concerns: among them, pollution and nuclear war), and scraps and detritus from the world at large, picked up in the street or culled from a newspaper. Indeed, it can be said that in Borofsky's oeuvre no morsel is too lowly to be considered eligible for elevation to the status of art, an elevation he sanctifies by the simple inscription of a number. The works within the installations consist of wall drawings, mechanized constructions, cut-outs, drawings push-pinned edge-to-edge along the wall, video, and much else. Throughout these many forms he regularly depicts a whole series of "archetypal" personages: Running Man, Man with a Briefcase, Molecule Man, Figure With Pointed Ears, Hammering Man, and Chattering Man.

The context for all this is the dream. Borofsky has long kept notes of his dreams and these, recounted in an innocent and childlike manner, provide much of the subject matter for what we see. *I dreamed that blacks were marching for freedom and one girl said she would tell the truth* is the title of one wall drawing, which shows a group of black demonstrators and a single female figure. Here and elsewhere Borofsky presents himself as a naïve observer, a questioner of the world around him. This stance places him firmly in the tradition of the modern artist as child-man—"the grown-up," as Roger Shattuck wrote of Henri Rousseau, "who has refrained from putting off childish things."

This dream atmosphere—together with the incessant numbering, which provides an abstract, independent system for keeping record—creates an aesthetic realm in which the normal conditions of time and space are suspended, or, rather, reinvented. Dreams give Borofsky not only his subject but also his license, for they open up a world where normally contradictory and unrelated phenomena can exist in harmony, and where nothing is open to the charge of preposterousness or unreason. How else could one invent or sanction as art such works as *Dancing Clown,* wherein a motorized ballerina with a clown's head gyrates to the tune of "I Did it My Way," or *Man in Space Video with Barbecue,* in which the figure forms and reforms itself on video? The dream references permit a nonpictorial, nonhierarchical space where everything exists simultaneously in a continuous flux. If Rauschenberg was avowedly attempting to "operate in the gap between art and life," then Borofsky is trying to operate with one foot in each camp.

This is all very well, but Borofsky turns out to be too good at creating the simultaneous, multisensory experience of his installations, and he pays a price. For it is almost impossible to concentrate on one image or group of images without the chatter of other goings-on intruding on one's attention. And when something does finally cut through all the visual and aural noise, one finds, all too often, slender rewards. A work that might be passingly engaging when seen in context has little to sustain it when closely examined. What, besides a moderately ironic, superficial pathos, is there to see in *Dancing Clown*? And what is one to make of Borofsky's personages? On close inspection, I'm afraid, they begin to look more like ciphers than archetypes. The lone exception is Running Man, which was most effective on the Berlin Wall during the "Zeitgeist" exhibition in 1982 but which looks somewhat displaced, for lack of a political context, at the Whitney.

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In all the excitement attending Borofsky's work—doubtless fueled by the affecting persona of the child-man projected through his work—something important has been missed. Much is made in the exhibition's catalogue of the fact that in these installations we "experience the content of the artist's mind," that they represent "that nineteenth-century romantic conception: the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* the total artwork." That we do experience the contents of the artist's mind is beyond doubt, but we only do so, I think, by virtue of Borofsky's continuing debt to Conceptual art, for there is much in his work that is deeply connected to that sensibility: the interest in fusing art and politics; the concern with making art free of the dictates of the art market; the use of the installations and wall drawings; the rejection of "fine art." Even Borofsky's counting, with its emphasis on process, abstract order, and rendering tangible the intangible, is a direct outgrowth of Conceptualist aesthetics.

But there is another, more important, respect in which Borofsky reveals himself as a latter-day Conceptual artist. That is in the pervasive emphasis on ideas over the works themselves. This emphasis is the source of the transient appeal of such works as *Dancing Clown* and *Ping-Pong Table (Feel Free to Play),* which is painted to suggest the Soviet-American arms race. These are works that, like so many Conceptualist pieces, gain little from being taken beyond the stage of conception. Far from belonging wholeheartedly to the broad reaction against Conceptualism, Borofsky represents only a later and looser form of it. Thus, what is presented at the Whitney as innovative and groundbreaking, as in fact the latest thing, turns out to be—and not for the first time in this space—the simple updating of a manner that is already familiar to us. The spectacle may be more animated than it used to be, but it nonetheless has something of the quality of a late-night rerun.

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Books

The sins of the father

by Roger Kimball

My first glimpse of *Home Before Dark*[1] was the tantalizing excerpt that appeared this fall in *The New York Times Book Review* on the eve of the book's publication. An admirer of John Cheever's fiction, especially his stories, I read his daughter's revelations about his long but troubled relationship with *The New Yorker,* his alcoholism, and his bisexuality with all the interest that such gossipy revelations are wont to arouse.

But I was also angered by the piece. There was, first of all, the question of propriety. I am aware of how difficult it is to furnish criteria for such judgments. But to my mind, Susan Cheever's airing of intimate details about her father's life was in bad taste—a violation, to put it somewhat old-fashionedly, of filial piety. Indeed, it seemed so doubly, for her scrutinies naturally affect her mother, who is still living, as well as the memory of her father. And the impropriety of her exposé was compounded by its timing. John Cheever had died scarcely two years before, in June, 1982, and already here was his daughter performing a journalistic autopsy on his life. The objection that other biographies and memoirs are in preparation does nothing to mitigate the impression of unseemly haste.

But in addition to the slippery matter of propriety, *Home Before Dark*—the *phenomenon* of *Home Before Dark*—poses a more basic problem. I mean its blatant exploitation of literature. Miss Cheever's reflections acquaint us with a good many things about her father's character, but contribute virtually nothing to a better understanding of his work. On the contrary, the book is hardly more than our latest example of the trivial, the private, the sensational surrounding itself with the props of culture in order to legitimate what is essentially an exercise in gossip.

As such, its success was practically guaranteed. The preview in the *Times* christened *Home Before Dark* as a *bona fide* Literary Event. And the shower of reviews—in everything from *The New Republic* and *The New York Review of Books* to *Vogue*—confirmed its stature as a commercial literary property. The *Times* alone ran a review in the daily paper, a review in the Sunday paper, and subsequently—because any Literary Event worth its salt is naturally expected to be "controversial"—treated its readers to an article in the Style section that featured interviews with Miss Cheever, members of her family, and friends and associates of John Cheever to get their reaction to the book.

"I'd challenge anyone to read the book and say it's exploitative," Miss Cheever said in her interview for the *Times.* "I wrote out of love and anguish." Well, I did read the book. And I'd challenge anyone to read it and conclude that it's not exploitative:

1 *Home Before Dark: A Biographical Memoir of John Cheever by His Daughter,* by Susan Cheever. Houghton Mifflin, 256 pages, $15.95.

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exploitative of John Cheever's personal life, of his literary reputation, of the very idea of literature and the cachet that the "literary life"—heavy with associations of exotic, bohemian pleasures—has for the popular imagination.

Not that I doubt Miss Cheever's sincerity. I am perfectly willing to believe that *Home Before Dark* was born of "love and anguish." But, here as elsewhere, the value or quality of a work is quite distinct from the question of the personal feelings that happened to inspire it. In the present case, Susan Cheever's feelings of love and anguish do nothing to exonerate her book from the charge of being exploitative. As *Home Before Dark* makes abundantly clear, John Cheever was a complicated, difficult man. And being his child was a complicated, difficult fate. It is not at all surprising to discover that, at least where her father was concerned, Miss Cheever found that love was seldom unaccompanied by anguish. If the portrait of John Cheever that emerges from her book is "loving"—as most of the reviews have concurred in calling it—then it is a troubled, deeply ambivalent love, a love that constantly bears witness to the many tensions, frustrations, and disappointments that went along with being John Cheever's daughter.

One of the most difficult things must have been trying to live up to dad's idealized, adolescent image of wealth and glamour. "Naturally, my father had expected his only daughter to be a beauty," she writes.

> He imagined me dazzling New York society and making a brilliant match. He imagined taking me to the racetrack at Saratoga and having everyone crane their [*sic*] necks and murmur to each other, asking who the stunning young girl with John might be. He imagined us leading the Boston June Cotillon. His journals include fantasies about conversations with the father of the groom—a Vanderbilt, a Biddle, a Cabot—in which the old gentleman explains the social and financial obligations I will have as his son's bride and my father assures him that I am up to it. When I was born, it was my father who decided to name me Susan. "She'll have long blonde hair and drive a sports car and we'll call her Susie," he said.

Unfortunately, reality proved to be a disappointing consort. "They did call me Susie, but otherwise I defied my father's fantasies. As an adolescent I was dumpy, plagued by acne, slumped over, and alternately shy and aggressive, and my lank brown hair was always in my eyes."

Reading *Home Before Dark,* one can't help but wonder whether Miss Cheever's defiance ended with adolescence. It may be going too far to say that she sought to even the score with this book; but it is hard to escape the impression that *Home Before Dark* is her *apologia pro vita sua,* her attempt to explain, to excuse, to justify herself in the face of her life with her father. "In our family, no one ever asked for help," Miss Cheever remarks at one point. "Weakness was treated as a temporary aberration, and failure was a bad joke."

Miss Cheever tells us that she began writing about her father in an effort to come to terms with her feelings when, in 1981, she learned that he was terminally ill. But what began as a kind of therapy took on a life of its own, assumed narrative shape, and turned into a biographical memoir. Or perhaps I should say "autobiographical memoir." For the real subject of *Home Before Dark* is Susan Cheever, illuminated by the borrowed light of her father. A better subtitle for the book might have been "An Autobiographical Memoir of John Cheever's Daughter by His Daughter." In one representative episode, she tells us about a visit home when her father was dying and she and her mother, Mary Cheever, were trying to make the weak and bedridden writer comfortable. He felt hot, and knowing that he often liked to have electrical appliances unplugged as well as turned off, Miss Cheever pulled the plug on the portable heater in his room.

> From his face, I knew I had done the wrong thing. "How clever of you Susie," he spoke in a high cracked voice . . . . "How *clever* of you

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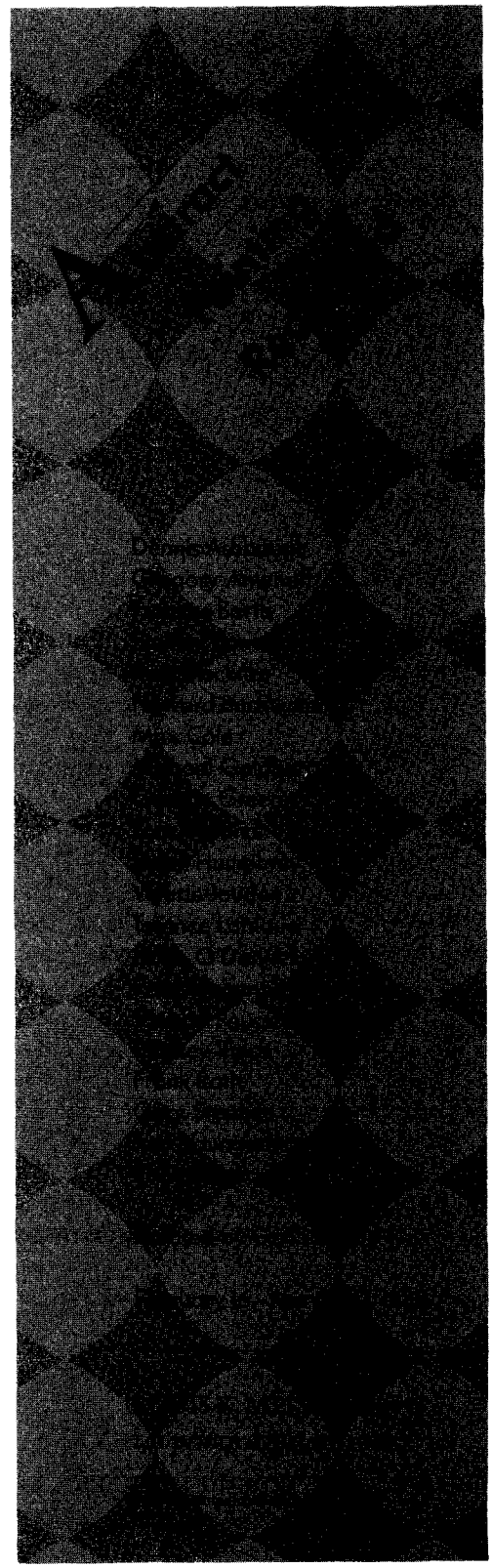
to think I wanted it unplugged." His words were slurred and faint, but his sarcasm was unmistakable . . . . It brought back all those other times. How clever of you, Susie, to have brought me aspirin when I'm supposed to be taking Tylenol! How clever of you to arrive at precisely the wrong thing. How clever of you to do things so completely incorrectly that it almost seems clever.

As I stood there at the end of the bed, my heart just sank. I had come out from the city to love him; I couldn't do it.

Even with her father *in extremis,* Susan Cheever manages to assume center stage, seizing the occasion to play the wronged but sensitive martyr.

"I don't think I would have started this book if I had known where it was going to end," she writes in her Preface, "but having written it I know my father better than I ever did while he was alive." We know him better, too, and while it is easy to appreciate the book's value as therapy for Miss Cheever, it is difficult to understand why she would want to broadcast something so full of intimate family history. She spares us little about her family, its provenance, its fortunes, its idiosyncrasies. And besides drawing on personal recollections, her own and those of family members and friends, Miss Cheever has also made extensive use of her father's thirty-volume journal. It is possible, in fact, to view *Home Before Dark* as a showcase for excerpts from John Cheever's journals. There are a handful of passages that concern his work as a writer, but the bulk of the excerpts deal with Cheever's phobias, fantasies, lusts. Many deal, often in excruciating detail, with his grim but ultimately victorious battle with alcoholism. At the request of her family, Miss Cheever cut the more graphic depictions of her father's homosexual liaisons from the final draft of the manuscript.

"The journals were private, of course," she admits, "kept as a record of ideas and descriptive phrases as well as a means of writing some kind of order into pain and chaos. But toward the end of his life, after he



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stopped drinking, my father realized what an extraordinary document his journals had become, and I think he meant them to be read some day." Perhaps. But without restriction? Miss Cheever herself suggests that his search for a university or library to take the document failed because of the "complicated stipulations" he attached.

We do not really know what John Cheever's feelings about such matters were. He seems, however, to have taken a dim view of the gossip approach to literary appreciation. "The angriest I can remember him being in recent years was during a conversation we had about Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift,*" Miss Cheever reports.

> I was fascinated to hear through the literary grapevine that it was based on Bellow's experience at Princeton, and that the main character was drawn from the poet Delmore Schwartz. I couldn't wait to tell my father, but instead of being interested, he was furious.
>
> "That's the kind of speculation I abhor," he said . . . . "The book is a great work of fiction, it cannot be reduced to gossip." I always learned something from my father's anger.

No doubt she did learn something, but just what is hard to say; *Home Before Dark* does not, in any case, evidence mastery of the lesson implicit in this anecdote.

Part of the problem is that Miss Cheever apparently had her heart set on writing a novel, not a memoir. We learn that she has already published three novels, and that she left another to one side when she found herself in the midst of *Home Before Dark.* But the book, especially in the portions that discuss her father's bisexuality, conspicuously strives for novelistic *éclat.* Instead of giving a straightforward, factual account, Miss Cheever exploits the situation for its drama and pathos, romanticizing over several chapters her gradual discovery of her father's complicated sexual life. An early chapter concludes with this cliffhanger:

> Late at night the telephone rings. My father has been dead six months, but the ringing phone reminds me of the late-night calls I got when he was sick, and of the call I was expecting then but never got because I was with him when he died. Now the call is from a writer my father encouraged for a while and finally gave up on. He always drank too much . . . .
>
> "I have these letters from John," this writer says. His voice is slurred and slow. "He wrote me these letters. I don't know why he told me these things."
>
> "What kind of things?" I say. His glass clunks against the mouthpiece of the telephone.
>
> "Terrible things. I don't know why he told me. I wouldn't ever publish them, of course."
>
> "Why don't you send me copies and I'll have a look?"
>
> "I mean I know John cared about me, but I don't know why he wrote me these letters if he didn't want me to use them somehow, you know? . . . It's dough, you know. I don't have any. I could get some dough for these. I mean, if he didn't want me to use them, why did he write me these letters?"
>
> "I doubt that he meant you should sell them," I say. It is dark in our bedroom. Outside I can see the streetlights on Central Park West and the shadows of the big trees in the park. "What's in these letters?" I ask. "What are they about?"
>
> "Awful things, about his brother, and Mary, and I wouldn't want Mary ever to see them," he says . . . . There is a series of clicks, and our conversation is cut off. I hang up and sit for a moment on the edge of the bed wondering where he was calling from, what dingy bar in what far-off city. And I wonder what could be in those letters, and why my father might have written secrets to a man he never trusted. It's late at night. After a while, I go back to sleep.

It takes several more chapters, Dear Reader, for our heroine to realize what's going on. She stumbles onto revealing letters without quite grasping their significance, dramatizes pregnant conversations with her father in which the truth about his feelings is obvious to everyone but her, and so on. This approach undoubtedly increases the entertainment value of *Home Before Dark.* But it is not at all clear that entertainment value is

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the *raison d'être* of every form of discourse—of the literary biographical memoir, for example, where tact and a concern for the writer's work might be thought to play an equally important role.

Not that all of *Home Before Dark* exhibits such novelistic garnish. Much of it approximates the detached, hyper-factual tone that has become the trademark of *The New Yorker*. I suppose this is only natural. In the early Sixties, John Cheever's longstanding relationship with the magazine became strained in a dispute over money (which Miss Cheever details to the penny), but it managed to persist until the end of his life. And Miss Cheever has maintained the association with *The New Yorker*; Calvin Tompkins, her second husband, has been a staff writer for the magazine for many years. But regardless of such influences, her wholesale absorption of *New Yorker*ese is breathtaking. "During the ten years we lived in Scarborough," she writes,

> my father and I used to go visiting on weekend mornings. After breakfast we would drive over to Croton to see the Boyers, or to the Maxwells' in Yorktown Heights, or up Scarborough Road to the Kahns', or to the Spears' in Briarcliff, or over to the Swopes' on Hawles Avenue, or around the corner of the estate to the Schoaleses', or even across the river to the Ettlingers' in Pomona.

Or in case you were wondering how to get to Ossining from Manhattan:

> At the beginning of June, 1982, I drove out to Ossining to visit. I had gone out often that spring, driving up the West Side Highway and the Saw Mill River Parkway to Route 9A, or over the Willis Avenue Bridge and onto the Major Deegan Expressway.

Miss Cheever refers occasionally to her father's notorious snobbery and "patrician airs." She criticizes this side of his character, but it seems to have been passed on intact to his daughter. Such things are difficult to trace, of course, but in the end they are as unmistakable as a person's laugh or tone of voice. Consider, for example, her observation about her father's brother, Fred:

> And it's true, Fred was willing to play the boor. His admiration for my father and his talent was unstinting, and his family was raised to admire us, our taste, our culture, our innate classiness, as vigorously as our family was raised *not* to admire Fred and Iris and their way of life.

With respect to snobbery, at least, Miss Cheever *is* her father's daughter, manifesting throughout *Home Before Dark* a superior, patronizing attitude. After she had embarked on her career as a writer, she recalls, her father had told her that "fiction is not a competitive sport." This dictum came in handy when she had to rebuff an admirer of her father's work whom she chanced to encounter at The New York Society Library:

> "Oh," says a deep voice next to me. "Are you doing research on John Cheever?"
>
> I look up from the big wooden desk and nod slightly. The New York Society Library has installed new lamps in the downstairs reading room, and their light reflects a pair of wide gray eyes.
>
> "Did you read his first story, 'Expelled'? It was reprinted in *The New Republic* when he died, you know."
>
> "How nice."
>
> "It's a great story! It's all there, if you ask me. Everything that came later. What a writer!" The eyes sparkle with a manic enthusiasm for literature, especially posthumous literature.
>
> "Thanks for letting me know." I close the volume of *Dictionary of American Biography* and stand up.
>
> "I always thought he was so great. Much better than Bellow and Updike and people like that."
>
> "Fiction is not a competitive sport," I say, replacing the volume and picking up my papers.
>
> "These days everything is competitive. It's not like it used to be you know. I'll see if I can find you a copy of that story."

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"Oh, thank you, no." I move toward the door.

"Are you writing a biography of John Cheever?"

"I don't think so," I say.

"You should, you really should. He was so important."

Miss Cheever obviously did not have much patience with this fellow's naïve enthusiasm, but she took his advice anyway. Reflecting on the phenomenon of *Home Before Dark,* I am not sure which is more dispiriting: the book itself or the reading public's mindless endorsement of such exercises in mock-candid sentimentalization. And as for the sordid details of John Cheever's life, I'm inclined to agree with his son Ben. Asked by *The New York Times* what he thought of his sister's revelations about his father, he replied, "I don't think it's anybody's business."

Stodgy pudding

J. B. Priestley English Journey.
University of Chicago Press,
320 pages $24.95
Beryl Bainbridge English Journey:
or The Road to Milton Keynes.
George Braziller, 158 pages, $12.95

reviewed by Herb Greer

John Boynton Priestley was a fecund but second-rate man of letters who was lucky. In 1929 he published what he called a picaresque novel, *The Good Companions,* about a jolly troupe of travelling entertainers. Written deliberately against the fashion of the time, it was an unexpected best-seller, and put him on the road to becoming a public figure. During the Second World War, when he made morale-boosting broadcasts for the BBC, it seemed that everyone in Britain knew about J. B. Priestley and his tweed jacket and his pipe, and his large, avuncular, baggy face. But not everyone was fond of him. George Orwell placed him among Communist sympathizers who could be "very dangerous" because of their public position. This, however, was an extravagant opinion. Like many of his contemporaries, Priestley was one of the soft-headed bourgeois Left, harboring a streak of contempt for the working class while flattering them with sentimental praise. His best-seller had given him the image of a jovial "good companion" when in fact he was a rough-edged Yorkshireman, apt to be cantankerous and self-centered, not to say arrogant. He certainly had an overblown idea of his talent, and his literary pose of bluff common sense did not conceal a coarse Grub Street sloppiness in the style and content of his writing.

These qualities are abundantly present in *English Journey,* re-issued by University of Chicago Press (!) in a "Jubilee" edition, illustrated (as the original was not) by eighty 1930s vintage photographs selected by Priestley's friend John Hadfield. The text is a discursive, rather tedious, and gracelessly written account of a short trip taken by the author in the autumn of 1933. The occasion of this journey was the opening of a Priestley play at the Palace Theatre in Manchester, but he began at Southampton on the Channel coast, moved west through Bristol and the Cotswolds, then veered north through the industrial Midlands and the Black Country, as it was then called. After a pause in Manchester to deal with the play, Priestley continued further north as far as Newcastle-on-Tyne and then returned quickly to London via Lincoln and Norfolk. He began the journey with The People on a bus, and finished it in a chauffeur-driven car.

The book's gold-trimmed dustjacket prints a chunk of praise from the *Spectator.* It mentions intimate penetration into character, a kind of human affection that is "very different from philanthropy," and suggests that Priestley plumbed "the hidden depths of the English nature"—which I take to mean the English character rather than countryside and climate. The *Times Literary Supplement* of the day was less fulsome. It said, "he does not tell us a great deal we have not already learned through our own observations, our newspapers, our reviews, and our pock-

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ets . . . . He is rather apt to assume . . . that his readers know little of the tragedy of the unemployed and need dragooning into active sympathy with them; and while he will entertain many, he will exasperate not a few."

These opinions deal with content without going into the book's major source of exasperation, which is Priestley's style. Orwell's review of a Priestley novel, *Angel Pavement* (he called it "six hundred pages of middle article"), could as well apply to *English Journey*:

> . . . toward the end of the book there is an account of a game of bridge, and the account contains two errors which would never have been made by a careful observer. It is a small point, but it confirms the general impression that Mr. Priestley's work is written altogether too easily.

There is nothing wrong with an impression of ease. Rebecca West's famous travel book *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* moves, like most of her writing, with a superb feeling of spontaneity—but it does so with class and with extraordinary grace. These qualities are utterly lacking in *English Journey*. I do not think Orwell was talking about ease, really. He was pointing to an absence of care in the writing, a nattery flavor of Grub Street facility, of slapdash hackwork with accidental good bits here and there. Reading Priestley is very much like eating an old-fashioned English pudding called Spotted Dick. This is a bowl-shaped wodge of flour-and-suet dough which is boiled or steamed, contains a few currants, and is sometimes sauced with a sweet, runny, yellow glutinous substance known in Britain as packet-custard.

The currants in Priestley's stodgy pudding are few and far between: an amusing sketch of a Micawber-type salesman on the bus to Southampton; the description of a Cotswold house, Snowshill Manor, and its delightful crackpot of an owner[1]; Nottingham's Goose Fair, an old-fashioned carnival; the Palace Theatre in Manchester; and a very funny anecdote in which Priestley tries to throw on the potter's wheel in Stoke-on-Trent. But there are about three hundred pages of text, and great stretches of it consist of stuff like this:

> . . . Bristol lives on, indeed arrives at a new prosperity by selling us Gold Flake [a brand of tobacco] and Fry's chocolate and soap and clothes and a hundred other things. And the smoke from a million Gold Flakes solidifies into a new Gothic Tower for the University; and the chocolate melts away only to leave behind it all the fine big shops down Park Street, the pleasant villas out at Clifton, and an occasional glass of Harvey's Bristol Milk[2] for nearly everybody.

Or this:

> . . . I thought these two villages, Lower Slaughter and Upper Slaughter, beautiful before, and think them so still. They should be preserved forever as they are now. A man bringing a single red tile or yard of corrugated iron into these two symphonies of grey stone should be scourged out of the district. I call the stone grey, but the truth is that it has no colour that can be described. Even when the sun is obscured and the light is cold, as it was that evening, these walls are still faintly warm and luminous, as if they knew the trick of keeping the lost sunlight of centuries gleaming about them.

No more details are given. Fortunately there is a photograph showing Lower Slaughter at least with more to it than a symphony of ineffably colorless warm faintly luminous walls. This miasmal pseudo-literary bum-rumble clogs the book, purporting to describe but actually fogging the objects of Priestley's attention. Such irritations are compounded by countless equivalents of the

1 It is typical of Priestley's approach that the name is not mentioned in the text. It was discovered when John Hadfield collected the photographs for this edition.

2 A brand of sherry. Bristol's working-class people would have snorted at this. The commoner's drink of the area was and is scrumpy (hard cider) or beer.

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bridge-game mistake referred to by Orwell. In writing of the Cadbury Company's housing estate for workers at Bourneville, the author announces grandly that "No factory workers in Europe have ever been better off than these people." He ignores or (more likely) is unaware of similar and long-standing facilities at the Krupp works in Essen, or of earlier small-scale company villages for workers in Britain itself, like the one at Quarry Bank Textile Mill in Styal, Cheshire, where the Gregg family had shown the same concern for their employees even in the nineteenth century. Perhaps with an eye on the paternalistic aspects of this, Priestley changes his mind in mid-text and decides that it would be better for the Cadbury workers to "combine" and provide their own benefits, "not as employees but as citizens, free men and women."

He was very upset about the dangerous conditions in the coal mines of 1933, but waxed bluff and jolly about the trawlermen of Hull, who had to endure hazards in the North Atlantic winter that were just as lethal. He was also a sucker for a cliché or stereotypical image, swallowing a tale of an "old Cotswold game" recounted by a "large genial fellow"; the game turns out to be a yokels' shin-kicking contest, sounding suspiciously like a put-on for the benefit of the passing city slicker. Priestley's "intimate penetration" into English character or nature reveals a nasty streak of condescension when he mocks the class of "patrons of cheap amusements, the cinema and the wireless [radio] and so on," which "before did nothing in its leisure but gossip and yawn and kick the cat and twiddle its thumbs." This set of dummies is of course the working class of the North, and Priestley later contradicts his insulting description of them, referring to widespread interest and activity in music, amateur theater, and other activities which are not "cheap amusements."

Writing during the Depression, and addressing himself to the economic problems of the time, he is like the man who reads a "Doctor" column in a popular newspaper and then uses it to discuss diagnosis with his mates in the local pub. Disclaiming Communist and fascist ideology, he nevertheless endorses a vulgar second-hand version of early Fabian conspiracy theories about capitalists and evil individualists and their "greed." His solution for the North is characteristically profound:

> Lancashire must have a plan. What is the use of England—and England in this connection, of course, means the City [of London], Fleet Street, and the West End Clubs [of London]—congratulating herself upon having pulled through yet once again, when there is no plan for Lancashire . . . . It does not matter whether Lancashire does the thinking today and the rest of England thinks it tomorrow, or whether we turn the tables on them and think today for Manchester tomorrow. But somebody somewhere will have to do some hard thinking soon.

If one can muster the obstinate will to plough through acres of this tabloid waffle, and what F. R. Leavis called the "stale anecdotage" of *English Journey,* it is possible to winkle out significant glimpses of what parts of England and the English were like two generations ago, facing heavy unemployment and an economic stagnation which is sometimes compared mistakenly with the ordeal of economic change in Britain now. The rural or "old" England, as Priestley calls it, seems to have altered relatively little in appearance. There are still quiet small villages in the countryside, clustered around centuries-old churches and sporting a local field where white-clad amateurs play cricket on Sunday.

The most obvious changes are to be found in the urban landscapes, and these stand out in the period photographs: the squalid alleys and back-to-back housing for mill workers and their grimy children in the Black Country have gone, along with the workers themselves; urban slums exist in the North today, and indeed in London and the Midlands, but they are usually inhabited by the families of black West Indian immigrants and poorer newcomers from the

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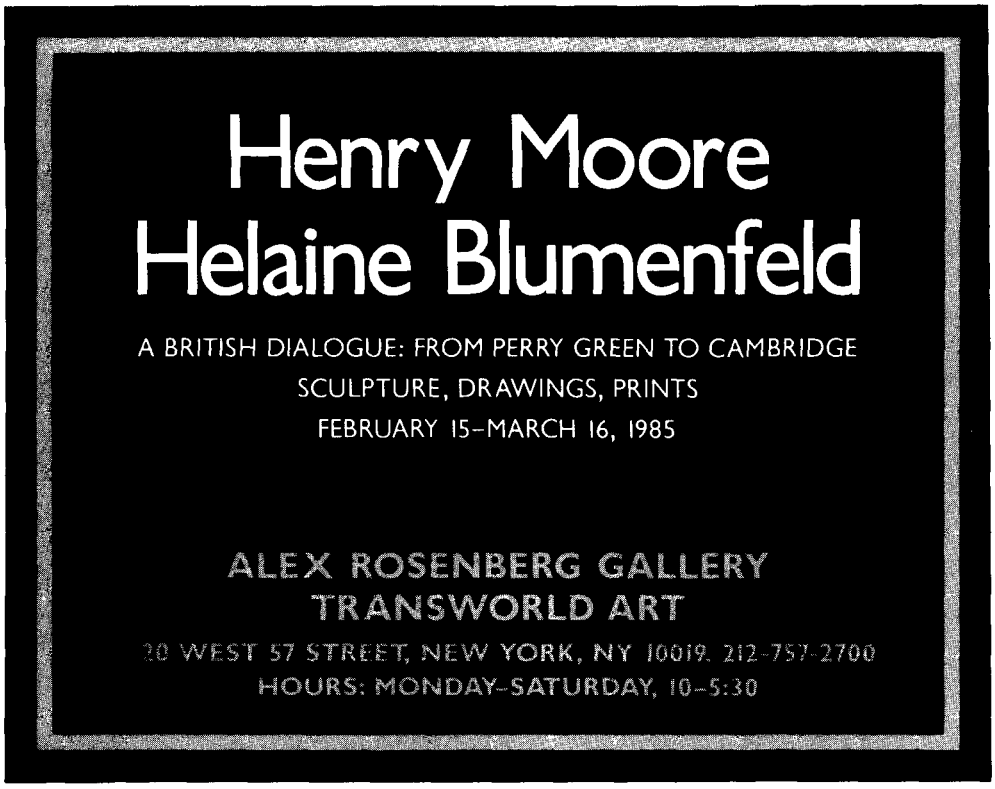
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SCULPTURE, DRAWINGS, PRINTS
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Indian subcontinent. East Indians now run the small businesses in these areas, discovering like the earlier hardfisted English shopkeepers of the North that "where there's muck there's brass [money]."

Priestley would not recognize Stoke-on-Trent in 1985. The great bottle kilns shown in the book's photographs no longer fire the Etrurian ware there now; the pottery industry has moved on. The poignant silhouette of old sailors mending nets at Canning Dock in Liverpool is an image of the dead; Liverpool's port is now moribund. The city is a battleground for race riots involving the postwar immigrants or their children, envenomed by radical left-wing politics. Incongruously, Liverpool was also the scene this year of a huge international garden festival and fun fair.

The row of frowning carnival boxers at Nottingham's Goose Fair is a memory, like the Dickensian shop fronts and awnings of Butcher Row in Coventry. The picture of Coventry's old cathedral shows it in oddly bare surroundings. Today the bombed ruins stand as a World War II memorial, surrounded by tourists and sightseers and facing Sir Basil Spence's new cathedral, with its great green tapestry by Graham Sutherland.

The gritty settled look of those 1930s surfaces is eloquently expressed in the book's photographs, less so in the blander text. Still, the writing does catch, sometimes inadvertently, a striking contrast with the postwar society and spirit of the British. Priestley does not actually speak much of the British. He is centered on England in a way that feels parochial now, when the "Brits" take their national identity and nickname from something wider, which includes England, Scotland and Wales, and—arguably, this—Northern Ireland. The traditional sectional loyalties are strong, of course, but there is still a general awareness of *Britain* that does transcend them.

The temper of the people has altered with time. This shows up most strikingly in Priestley's descriptions and comments on the unemployed of the Thirties. They exist in hard

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times and conditions, lacking jobs and a clear future, many thrown out of industries which would not recover, like the textile mills in the Black Country. There is a superficial resemblance to the out-of-work in today's shrinking economy, but the poor and the unemployed in *English Journey* do not feel sorry for themselves or moan about being thrown on the "scrap heap." The theatrical self-pity of the "deprived" and the disadvantaged—a political staple in Britain today—was absent in the people Priestley describes. There is none of the ostentatious self-righteousness over greedy conspirators-in-the-boardroom and evil individualists. It is not absent from the book, of course. Priestley provides it, oozing coarse and sanctimonious pity for the unemployed in journalistic catchphrases which annoyed the *TLS* reviewer. But in the people he talks to there is no hint of the emotional base for countless pressure groups, ethnic and others, who in 1985 jockey and agitate for administrative privilege and special spending in the welfare state. It is Priestley who goes on about a "plan" and, most of all, blames the greed of capitalists for the troubles of the workers. His commentary is like a strange backward echo of today's "socially aware" documentaries and *Guardian* and *Observer* feature writing—the same tissue of hackneyed "solutions" and blown-up expectations of what government can do to control the economy. This pours out of Britain's media today almost unchanged, spooned up by chic television producers and journalists who were not even born when Priestley wrote his book. The difference is that Priestley, while uttering the sentiments himself, does not urge and niggle at his interlocutors to share them, and to reflect on the bitter hopelessness of their lot. The style and procedure are different now, with unctuous presenters pushing microphones at workers and prompting them with the latest fashionable sociological cant.

In the summer of 1983 the Bristol office of the BBC sent out a documentary team to retrace most of Priestley's journey. It was the second time this had been done. The first rerun a few years before had used Priestley himself as narrator. The posthumous version in 1983 featured the novelist Beryl Bainbridge, who made her own set of notes during the filming. These were published last year as a new *English Journey*. On its cover the book is subtitled: "The road to Milton Keynes, being a rambling but truthful account of what one person saw & heard & felt during a journey through England."

What, then, did Miss Bainbridge see and hear and feel during this journey? The answer is, not a lot of any interest. She *looked* at a number of things and people, was exposed to what they said plus various other noises and—if the tone of her writing is any clue—felt nothing much beyond a nagging irritation, an occasional twinge of vague wistfulness, and *very* occasional wry amusement. After a life lived through the postwar years plus a generation of hindsight, she should have written an acute and fascinating book. In the event it is a mean, scrawny affair, the offhand account of a hurried and superficial tourist's exposure to parts of England. Miss Bainbridge is much more interested in herself than in England anyhow, returning again and again to her personal (and irrelevant) eccentricities—in particular her childhood ambition to be a morgue attendant, and her morbid fascination with graveyards, which she attributes to tours of such places as a young girl in the company of her father. This may be intended as a kind of lugubrious running gag; in fact it is a cheerless bore.

Any real effort toward insight or knowledge in depth of her itinerary is shrugged off. When, for example, one of her informants talks about Southampton in 1914 the reader teeters on the edge of something interesting; but she throws the chance away: it was "all too long ago." She claims an affinity with the past, but shows remarkably little taste or feeling for it, and seems confused as to what she herself means by the word. All we are given is a sporadic, negligent, and rather kitschy nostalgia. Her magpie prose takes up and drops sights and sounds and

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stray facts ("A nephew of Hitler, William Patrick Hitler, was born in Upper Stanhope Street in Liverpool.") in a careless, Andy Warhol manner, in which something or someone is in sight for a few seconds and then instantly ceases to matter. After a while this gives her book a seedy Carnaby Street flavor, a cheap inconsequential air which suggests that its publication is a catchpenny business, trading on her reputation as a novelist—in effect shortchanging the reader.

This is bad enough, but there is also her subtitle's claim to truth. If the claim is valid (and I have no reason to doubt it), the book is made worse still—because the author stands convicted of the worst sin a writer can commit today, which is to trivialize the truth and make it immediately forgettable. Seven pages from the end she says, "I tried to explain what we were doing and what we had done, but I couldn't remember the names of places any more, or what counties they were in." Such remembering is a writer's fundamental responsibility; if details of her experience are not worth the effort of remembering, why the devil were they worth setting down in the first place, and what reader of sound mind (except a professional reviewer in the line of duty) would or should bother to wade through these idle jottings? They are chaff. Nothing in the book is written as if it really mattered to Miss Bainbridge; there is thus no reason why it should matter to anyone else.

With all his faults, his slovenly haste, and his shallowness, Priestley is not guilty of such cheap-jack trading. He may have practiced his métier clumsily, throwing up a certain amount of padding and wind, but in him it is a failure of talent and not of concern. Though he was not one of your top quality litterateurs, he did grasp seriously at some of the shadows and colors and sounds of an England which has almost ceased to exist and which deserves to be remembered. For all its buckram, Priestley's book does at least give strong and useful hints, both in content and writing, of a people already in decline, but bearing the marks and character of a former greatness.

Fitzgerald tales

James R. Mellow Invented Lives: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. Houghton Mifflin, 569 pages, $22.50

reviewed by Sonya Rudikoff

> Nobody knew whose party it was. It had been going on for weeks. When you felt you couldn't survive another night, you went home and slept and when you got back, a new set of people had consecrated themselves to keeping it alive.

So Zelda Fitzgerald described the characteristic occupation of the Twenties. Reading about it again makes one wonder about the meaning of such parties. Why were there so many parties? Why did they drink so much? James Mellow's new biography of the Fitzgeralds leaves such questions and their implications still largely unanswered. Of course, there was the Jazz Age, and the Revolt against Prohibition, and the Defiance of Puritanism; but those are merely labels, or outline headings, substitutes for explanation. Perhaps any comment or question about the Fitzgeralds' drinking is thought to be censorious. Don't all writers drink, all American writers especially? Calling attention to it upsets the easy domestication of tolerance. What seems most striking about the Fitzgeralds' drinking, and their recovery from it, is the allocation of time, energy, and money it needed, resources which in other lives might be employed differently. In fact, drinking was their *occupation,* and it prescribed the occasions, parties, bars, and cafés where it could be exercised. Only much later did it become an addiction or a biochemical condition or solitary pursuit. Certainly in the beginning the Fitzgeralds did not drink out of despair or disillusion. For most of their lives, drinking was what they did; not an eruption or interference in their lives, instead it *was* their lives.

The unknowing young enthralled girl from Alabama, and the handsome talented young man from St. Paul, seeking his for-

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tune in the great world of New York: these two must be seen as adopting an intoxicated mode of behavior almost for want of any other. Without family, work, or any previous relation to the city, with no place, no links to anything, no regular income, few resources, they also tasted liquors never brewed, reinforcing the gin so emblematic of the day. The transforming magic of insouciance, admiration, glamour, success, and notoriety affected them, and before they quite understood what was happening to them, they became not merely examples of intoxication but victims of it. Their own personalities intoxicated them too, and so did their own exploits, like riding on top of taxis, or jumping into city fountains, and they intoxicated each other. Images of themselves as they appeared to others excited them, occasions which produced these effects were sought or arranged, and in the absence of occupations, professional or social or familial, their energies were available. This golden couple of the Twenties seemed to float in the mind of the public as representative of youth and the new vitality of America; they took New York by storm, according to legend, and thought they would go on forever. Drink fueled that illusion, and drinking maintained it.

There have been many books about F. Scott Fitzgerald, large five-hundred- and six-hundred-page tomes, and the reader's temptation may be to grumble about still another one, to ask whether there is anything left to say, or, with peevish cleverness, to chide the author for serving a "Fitzgerald industry." Admittedly, Fitzgerald is not Dante, and the continued study of his work may not yield insights indefinitely; but, not quite everything has been said. There is room for James Mellow's new book.

Perhaps what readers really fear is another promotion, or another hagiography, another recital of the romanticizing litany which tries once again to proffer an image and enthrall us. Mellow's biography does not follow that pattern; it is a useful addition to the Fitzgerald shelf because it documents the extent to which not only Fitzgerald himself, but both of them, the fabled couple acting together, lived by fictions, inventing their own lives, treating themselves and those about them as part of a continuing fantasy. They themselves were well aware of it, and coached each other's performances, as when they gave a duet recital of the story of a French aviator's fatal love for Zelda. Fitzgerald said to Malcolm Cowley, "Sometimes I don't know whether Zelda and I are real or whether we are characters in one of my novels"; and throughout their lives, life would imitate art in the very moment that their lives were being re-created in fiction. Mellow's interest in the Fitzgeralds' self-creation, their early and prominent participation in their own mythicizing, advances well beyond the predictable adulation, elegiacs, and meticulous record of binges and hangovers so characteristic of the discussion of this couple; he shows something of how they sought the backgrounds for their own living theater.[1]

The invention of self was not a strategy discovered by the Fitzgeralds, however, and Mellow is perhaps too pleased with his idea to set it properly in the context of existing ideas about the development of personality. There are interesting implications here about the power of rationalizations and revisions of the past, about fantasies, projections, re-creations, complicated psychological systems which could illuminate the Fitzgeralds' inventions. Without an adequate perspective on these matters, Mellow's discovery of the Fitzgeralds' propensity to invent themselves not only shows a certain naïveté but also prevents him from carrying the idea further. Everyone after all constructs reality out of the materials at hand, even whole societies do so, and the inventions need to be shared and publicized if they are to be durable. Some aspects of self-invention might even be peculiarly American; Whitman, of course, is the prototype. What might have been especially interesting is a consideration of

1 It is of some interest that neither his play, *The Vegetable* (1923), nor hers, *Scandalabra* (1933), was successful.

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contemporary forms of self-invention and self-promotion, the development of techniques during the past half-century. The invented image of the self has shifted from its function as an agent of intoxication, as it was for the Fitzgeralds, to a newer more manipulated role, that of the commodity itself. The process is not unique, or peculiar to writers: artists, television personalities, architects, actors, figures in government and business, even impersonal organizations, all participate in processes of self-invention, serving their own ends and the celebrity culture, presenting identities as marketable objects.

Now, nearly forty years after both Fitzgeralds' deaths, their invented selves are securely anchored in a legend of youthful America, intoxicated by its own promise. The young woman, the young man, their exuberance, enthusiasm, and innocence defeated both by society and by themselves, redeemed in art and the defects of their virtues, have become almost canonical. It is a version of the American Dream now elaborated at the highest levels of American consciousness. *The Great Gatsby* is itself canonical, as *Silas Marner* used to be; few young persons can finish their education without reading it. And the last page of the novel, with its invocation of the early Dutch sailors, has become a standard text. The Twenties are cherished, the style and artifacts of the period handsomely installed in our heritage. (It may be interesting to note here that Michael Graves, the postmodern architect, is illustrating a new edition of *The Great Gatsby*.)

If Mellow departs from the legend, and even appears to be harshly critical—as he has to some reviewers—it is perhaps because he fails to rehearse the saga with the expected romantic emphasis. Even to speak of "self-invention" may be offensive to some readers. Mellow concentrates attention narrowly on the fabled couple's shared identity, however, and skimps on providing much of a context for them. Their story is culled from their autobiographical accounts—how Zelda came from Montgomery, Alabama, daughter of a

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judge, Episcopalian, granddaughter of a senator, and how Fitzgerald met her during the First World War, he the son of a faded once prosperous family with roots in the South as well as the Middle West, Catholic, ambitious. What "Catholic" might have meant in the America of Fitzgerald's youth, what the Princeton of that day was, or Paris, or the Riviera, all such designations are more stated than supported. So thoroughly are the Fitzgeralds taken at their own definition that when their families are referred to during the course of their story, it is a shock to realize that those were real people, still alive! They had barely figured in the story, appearing only in brief formulaic stereotypes, in the background. The fabled couple may have invented themselves from the start, when they married two days ahead of plan, hurriedly, in the rectory of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, at ages nineteen and twenty-three, without parents present but with *This Side of Paradise* just published. Their biographer was not obliged to limit himself to their invented identity, but following their lead produces a somewhat claustral quality in the book. Of course there are extensive notes, but they generally cite an earlier biography of Zelda, or the big biographies by the devoted Andrew Turnbull, the indefatigable Matthew Bruccoli, or Arthur Mizener. Not quite enough new material has been explored, or from independent sources beyond the Fitzgerald milieu. Legendary exploits are reported from the same group of witnesses among Fitzgerald's friends: John Peale Bishop, Edmund Wilson, Alexander McKaig. Or Hemingway's version, or Malcolm Cowley's, or Zelda's, or the fictional re-creation or Gerald and Sara Murphy's version are compared. Celebrated incidents are scrupulously recounted: the Hemingway-Callaghan fight, with Fitzgerald as timekeeper (when he failed to call time), or the Fitzgerald visit to Edith Wharton (when the old dowager showed her mettle, and he felt inexplicably defeated by her), or the versions of the celebrated exchange between Hemingway and Fitzgerald about the character of the very rich and whether they're really different or just have more money.

There is a lack of distance in collating these tales of the Fitzgeralds in the Jazz Age. As they fly in the mists of their romanticizing legend, unique figures, there is no sense that others might have existed, even others rather like them, other young and golden people, mischievous and irrepressible and defiant. This treatment of them reinforces a sense of their unreality; and the second part of the story, beginning with Zelda's breakdown after ten years of marriage, is equally unreal and free of social buttressing. Indeed, the romance deepens, as Zelda becomes the princess imprisoned now in a clinic, not a tower, imprisoned in her own insanity, remote and unreachable. No longer was she the spirited girl of inspired spontaneity, but the more diabolically triumphant figure whose diffuse eruptions would be as closely monitored as once her cheeky exploits were.

The problem of distance is especially evident in Mellow's treatment of the Princeton setting and the Princeton element in Fitzgerald's story. Even after some seventy years, these personal conceptions, powerful identifications, intoxicating dreams, and early literary triumphs remain at the level of Fitzgerald's own presentation of them. The same elements and sentiments are once again summoned: the famed Cottage Club, the *Tiger,* the *"Prince,"* and Triangle Club, the *Nassau "Lit,"* Christian Gauss, the football games, the elegance and glamour Fitzgerald saw in his classmates. He was to be a boozy old alumnus, telephoning the football coaches in the middle of the night with neat ideas for brilliant plays. Although his departure from Princeton was inglorious, he would become a great celebrant of his alma mater:

> Suddenly all around you spreads out the loveliest riot of Gothic architecture in America, battlement linked on to battlement, hall to hall, arch-broken, vine-covered—luxuriant and lovely over two square miles of green grass. Here is no monotony, no feeling that it was all

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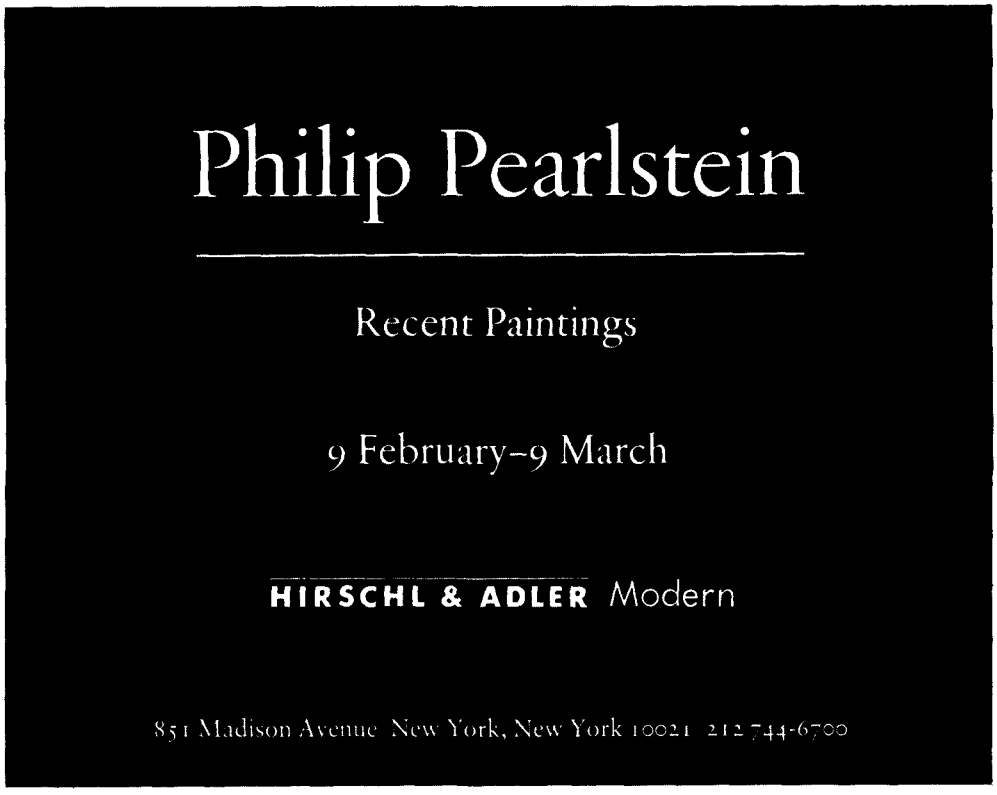
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built yesterday at the whim of last week's millionaire.

In fact, most of that Gothic architecture would have been fairly new when Fitzgerald '17 was a student, built if not "yesterday," then shortly before, in the Nineties or in the years 1900-14. Some of the dining clubs dated from the Eighties but most were later, like Cap & Gown (1890), Quadrangle (1901), where some of Fitzgerald's literary friends were, or Cannon (1911). The splendid neo-Georgian Cottage Club by McKim, Mead & White was built in 1903-06. By 1936, when Fitzgerald's encomium was written, other notable Gothic structures had been built, thanks to Rockefeller, Dodge, McCormick, and similar gifts. It was like Fitzgerald not to remember the genuinely eighteenth-century Nassau Hall (1756), setting for the Continental Congress, or the Notman buildings, or the Richardsonian Alexander Hall (1892), and to blur any distinction between the "Gothic" architecture of Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) and the Gothic architecture of Oxford and Cambridge. It isn't clear whether Fitzgerald knew there was a difference. Fitzgerald was powerfully affected by Princeton men—"lazy, good-looking and aristocratic"—and this part of his formative Princeton experience is similarly obscured when the critic or biographer adopts Fitzgerald's own perspective. For example, Princeton was notably Southern in orientation with many students from the South; Cottage was Southern; so was the town itself, with many black families whose forebears, as slaves, had accompanied earlier generations of students. The dining clubs were served and staffed by some of those blacks, as if on the plantation. For Fitzgerald, these elements would have been connected with his lifelong tenderness for his unsuccessful father, and the father's Southern heritage. And surely it must have been involved in his falling in love so passionately and permanently, soon after leaving Princeton, with the provocative, good-looking, imperiously unpredictable belle of Montgomery, Alabama. There

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are meanings to be explored in these clusters of impressions, but only if the biographer goes beyond Fitzgerald's set boundaries.

Both the Fitzgeralds were destroyed by their invented identity, she in her insanity, and he in a more protracted deterioration from 1930 to 1940. Zelda's role in their invented selves proved even more significant than either of them could have realized. He was outraged and combative with her doctors about her treatment. When she wrote her novel, he was furious, having regarded the material of her life as *his* material, subject to his control. He wrote abusively to her psychiatrist about it, and to Maxwell Perkins at Scribner's, whom he urged not to praise Zelda too much. The lengthy account of their arguments over their shared history, and his efforts to persuade the psychiatrists that his life and work were the more valuable, is chilling.

Like many a writer's wife, Zelda had enjoyed the wholesale appropriation of her self and her history for the purposes of Fitzgerald's fiction. It had been Zelda who gave him her diaries before they were married, who rather delighted in his retailing them among his friends and in his work. She had taken pride in the persona created for her and with her. What she might not have been prepared for was the way he would press his claims. Admittedly, any "rights" to the "material" of fiction are not easily assigned, but Fitzgerald couldn't see the problem. Not only did he challenge her right to use her own life and experiences in her own novel *Save Me The Waltz,* but he also claimed her breakdowns, recoveries, relapses, her therapy, even her letters to him, as his material. He wanted Zelda's doctors to accept his diagnosis of her, and to give him authority over her; he was just then writing in *Tender Is the Night* about a psychiatrist with an insane wife. That book was plotted with a chart of Zelda's illness, and it incorporated the very phrases she had used in letters written from the clinic, as she tried to reconstruct their shared reality; her remembered words from their real life became the substance of his novel. Her illness gave him substantial material for the character of Nicole. He also sent one of Zelda's letters to his agent, to illustrate the strain of his life, and later used one in trying to break off a love affair that had become too demanding. When Zelda planned a novel about Nijinksy, involving material about insanity and psychiatry, he made her stop because he himself was using psychiatric material in *Tender Is the Night.* The psychiatric material was about *her,* including Bleuler's diagnosis of her, but he still considered it as his material.[2]

The horror of all this is not quite effaced by Fitzgerald's subsequent stories of his own despair, alcoholism, attempts to earn money to pay for Zelda's treatment, his victimization as a Hollywood screenwriter, and the destruction of his hopes and dreams. His story was a dreary catalogue of drunken states, illness, errors of judgment, attacks on friends, abusive accusations, self-dramatizations, gross misperceptions. The habit of inventing his life remained, even without Zelda's sharing in it explicitly. Despite the abuse to which all his friends were subjected, many of them would not be dismissed; they maintained a belief in his gifts, and after his death they saw to it that he was not forgotten. *The Crack-Up, The Last Tycoon,* the letters were all published, earlier novels were reprinted, his reputation was revived and renewed. In Europe, and throughout the rest of the world, translations proliferated. *Gatsby le magnifique* was first translated in 1926, then reissued in 1946; it was soon followed by others, like *Den store Gatsby,* (1948), *Il grande Gatsby* (1950), *Zärtlich ist die Nacht* (1952), *Gakuen no kochira gawa* (1957), *Kultahattu* (1959), *Újra Babilonban* (1962), *O grande Gatsby* (1962), *Diamant velky jako Ritz* (1964), *Les enfants du jazz* (1967), *Velky Gatsby a jiné příběhy jazzového věku* (1970), *Lambi di*

2 *Tender Is the Night* was initially to be called *The Boy Who Killed His Mother* and had centered on characters other than Dick and Nicole Diver. Clearly there is much more to be said about the relation between earlier and later themes.

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paradiso (1975), and *Sukotto Fittsuzerarudo Kenkyū* (1977).

How should this story be read? If one is a Fitzgerald specialist, it can be read and compared with other books about Fitzgerald, or other American writers. A biography, however, is the record of a life—or, in this case, two lives—and is not the same as a literary study or the map of a literary canon. Here it is the life itself that is thought to be of primary interest, not as ancillary to the art. Justification by art is not in fact the subject of this biography. Frequently, biographies have offered a species of secular guidance; and life could teach by example, if not by accomplishment or precept. The problem is that without the justification by art, the lives provide only ambiguous direction. Zelda, with her Southern charm and pranks that did not travel well, becoming ominous when translated to the larger stage of the great world, the high-school daredevil, her picture inscribed "Zelda Sayre: What the Hell!"—could someone want to be like that? Or like her symbiotic lover, in his alcoholic haze, who, with her, still always wanted to believe "in summer hotels and the philosophies of popular songs?" His beliefs about life and art do not travel so well from the Twenties either. What injunction should be heeded in this story? It would have made a difference in their lives if the Fitzgeralds had lived by a philosophy not found in summer hotels, popular songs or the "Gothic" architecture of Princeton. But is it a tragedy that they didn't? Perhaps the cautionary tale must be interpreted as telling something about visions of the self, not just the familiar romantic visions of the past, but the more potent illusions hidden in the historicizing of modernity and popular culture.

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Notebook

A crow for the Queen

by Robert Richman

CROW'S FIRST LESSON

God tried to teach Crow how to talk.
"Love," said God. "Say, Love."
Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into
the sea
And went rolling downwards, discovering its
own depth.

"No, no," said God, "Say Love. Now try
it. LOVE."
Crow gaped, and a bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito
Zoomed out and down
To their sundry flesh-pots.

"A final try," said God. "Now, LOVE."
Crow convulsed, gaped, retched and
Man's bodiless prodigious head
Bulbed out onto the earth, with swivelling
eyes,
Jabbering protest—

And Crow retched again, before God could
stop him.
And woman's vulva dropped over man's neck
and tightened.
The two struggled together on the grass.
God struggled to part them, cursed, wept—

Crow flew guiltily off.

"Crow's First Lesson" is from the book *Crow* by Ted Hughes. Copyright © 1971 by Ted Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

Ever since it was first established with the appointment of Ben Jonson in 1617, the office of the Poet Laureate in England has often been misunderstood. It is commonly assumed, for example, outside literary circles at least, that the Poet Laureate is somehow to be regarded as England's "best" living poet; that the Laureateship, in other words, represents quality or even greatness. But this has rarely been the case. The Laureateship has seldom been conferred solely on the basis of great talent or great achievement, and more than a few mediocre writers can be counted among those who have held the post. Colley Cibber (1671-1757) is only the most famous of these—famous, that is, *for* his mediocrity. The one consistent thing the Laureateship does signify, however, is that the poet selected for the post is assumed to serve as a representative spokesman for the English society of his time. The Poet Laureate is thus expected to be, above all, a social poet whose voice represents in one way or another the voice of a people.

It was with considerable surprise, then, if not with a sense of shock, that the literary world got the news in the last days of 1984 that England's new Poet Laureate—selected to succeed the late John Betjeman—is to be Ted Hughes, a writer widely regarded as the most anti-social voice in English poetry today. Now fifty-four years old, Hughes himself is a fierce recluse, and his characteristically violent poetry is much occupied with, as he himself once put it, "the war

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between vitality and death." As this suggests, his work looks back to D.H. Lawrence, among others, and like Lawrence's poetry, Hughes's represents a distinctly primitivist strain in English verse. Something of this primitivist perspective was evident in the remarks Hughes made to the London press on the day of the announcement. (It was reported in the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* on December 20.) "I think there is still a useful role for a Poet Laureate," Hughes said, "although it rather depends on what you think of the crown. For me the crown is the symbol of the unity of the tribe, the spiritual unity. When that is outmoded, perhaps the job of the Laureate will be."

Given this perspective, it hardly seems adequate to describe Hughes, as Philip Howard, the literary editor of the *Times,* did in his article on the appointment as "without a doubt the most anti-Establishment" figure "to have become a court official." The term "Establishment" does not begin to describe what Hughes's poetry has set itself against. We shall probably be closer to the real animus in Hughes's work if we see it as opposed to society itself.

Given the conventions that have governed this appointment in the past, it was expected that Philip Larkin would get the post. It is, after all, Larkin's voice—its diction, its cadences, its concern for the small but nevertheless living social world—that is in the poetic mainstream of England right now. For all Larkin's grimness and bleakness, his work best characterizes the ways and means of postwar British society. The poetry of Ted Hughes, on the other hand, suggests, in its diction, imagery, and entire emotional scenario, a world where the mores of civilized society are inconsequential. The violence of nature constitutes the whole of Hughes's poetic vision. It is a world essentially without civilized human interaction. Thus for all Hughes's tremendous gifts of language, and for all his considerable accomplishments as a poet, he seems to be singularly the oddest choice for the position of Poet Laureate.

It is hardly surprising that the reaction of the British press to the appointment was mixed. "The first reactions," wrote John Ezard in the left-wing *Guardian,* "were of astonishment that . . . Philip Larkin had not got the job." It was also reported in the *Guardian* that Geoffrey Grigson, the eighty-one-year-old poet, critic, and editor, "rose from a sickbed in rage at the news and came to a telephone to say: 'It's deplorable. He's such a bad poet. He can't write. I'd sooner Larkin any day. Larkin has much more dignity.'" Kingsley Amis, writer and lifelong friend of Larkin's, was reported in the *Guardian* to have said, "Dog doesn't eat dog, but it's a bit thick." Philip Howard declared that the selection was "a bit like appointing a grim young crow to replace a cuddly old teddy bear." (*Crow* is the title of a 1971 book by Hughes.) While acknowledging that Hughes's poetry is "very good," Howard said that the new Laureate "brings a gust of acrid provincial air to the ancient office." David Holloway, writing in the *Daily Telegraph,* said "there is no doubt that Hughes is a fine poet, even if some of his images ('my breath left tortuous statues in the iron light') are extravagent and his technique, at times, suspect . . . . With him the Laureateship could never be said to be dull, obsequious or even technically correct." Even W.L. Webb of the *Guardian* complained that "much of *Crow* and *Gaudete* is definitely not to be put in front of the children, not Mrs. Thatcher either, one would imagine." An unsigned article in the *Observer* called it "an inspired choice."

It was left to Craig Raine, a poet who serves as Hughes's editor at Faber & Faber, to defend Hughes against some of his more vitriolic opponents. "Prim moralists have sometimes objected that the nature he presents in his work is violent and unpleasant—as if the poet is personally responsible for what he is simply and truthful recording . . . . Ted Hughes must be judged as a poet of the first rank, a writer justly honoured by the Laureateship and one who will do honour to the office."

How did it come to pass that England's

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most anti-social poet was given the post traditionally held by a poet of social England in its most conventional sense? By what profound misapprehension was Hughes's voice felt to be *the* voice of mainstream England for the closing decades of the twentieth century? What is particularly ironic is that this appointment should occur under the most avowedly conservative government Britain has had in decades. (Sir John Betjeman, England's last Laureate, was appointed under the softer Tory government of Sir Edward Heath in 1972.) The papers reported that Lord Gowrie, Mrs. Thatcher's Minister of the Arts and a poet himself, was influential in the decision to appoint Hughes. Is this the kind of thing Lord Gowrie had in mind when he wrote a book called *The Conservative Opportunity* in 1976? It is also curious that the single name recommended by the British Arts Council—Larkin's—was summarily ignored. (Early reports stated that Larkin had been offered the Laureateship and declined. Later it was confirmed that Hughes had been first choice all along.) Larkin's name, the *Guardian* reported, "also had a prime place on short lists submitted by other arts bodies."

The Laureateship is not an immensely important or influential position, as far as the future of English literature is concerned. English poetry will go its own way regardless of who holds the post. The principal function of the Poet Laureateship is, after all, a ceremonial one: the Laureate must compose commemorative odes and verses for all sorts of royal occasions. But if this ancient function removes the post somewhat from great contemporary significance, it is also what invests the Laureate with such respectability. To imagine Ted Hughes upholding this tradition seems more than a little far-fetched. Ted Hughes, the author of *Crow,* writing "verses" for royal births and baptisms? England had better brace itself for an assault on yet another of its hallowed traditions.

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